

Some Norse sites on Sanday, Orkney

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An archaeological sites and monuments inventory of the island of Sanday, Orkney has recently identified a number of sites likely to belong to a Norse context (Lamb 1980). In view of the scarcity of definite Norse sites in the Orkney Island group three of these were examined in more detail in order to provide a permanent record of their precise locations and land contours. All three are situated on the SW coast of the island (fig 1). The sites at Pool and Lamba Ness lie on the ridge of Eday sandstone which characterizes the more rugged southern landfall and the Ness of Brough site lies slightly further NE on the low-lying Rousay flags which constitute the majority of Sanday's surface geology.

Pool bay is a sheltered sandy inlet which local tradition holds to be a former Viking harbour. The W-facing coastline shows considerable topographical variation appropriate to buried settlement, and exposed archaeological horizons are now partially visible at the shoreline as a result of marine erosion and storm damage. This is especially apparent along a stretch some 60 m in length where erosion has exposed the interior of a mound (HY 61943785). A contour survey of this mound (fig 2) suggested that the deposits, far from being confined to the area defined by the mound itself, were likely to extend well inland into other visible surface features as far E as the present farm of North Mire. The area is likely to be one of considerable archaeological importance and this is supported by chance finds recorded in the vicinity. At Braeswick, a short distance to

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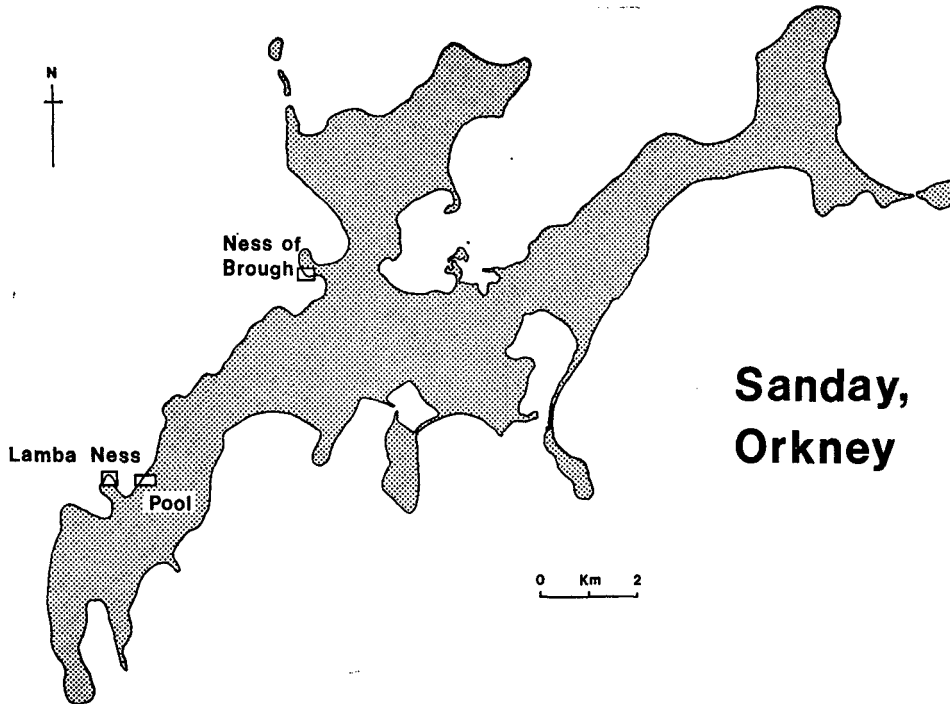


FIG 1

the S, a possible female burial of the Viking period (Lamb 1980, no 129; OAR no 335) yielded a bronze tortoise brooch and beads of glass and amber (Grieg 1940, 2, 88; Wainwright 1962, 148). The present owner of the Pool site, Mr John Skea of North Mire, who kindly permitted investigation of the mound, has a small collection of objects gathered from the eroded shoreline. These include bone pins, bone implements and whorls although none of them appear to be culturally diagnostic. Additionally there is a Viking bone comb, now on display at the Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall, which appears to have been found in the same vicinity (Lamb 1980, no 84; OAR no 290).

The rate of erosion at Pool appears to be considerable. The site has no protection from the NW gales and archaeological debris is continually being deposited at the base of the cliff. The exposed horizons are approximately 62 m in length and vary in height to a maximum of 2–3 m. Careful cleaning of the eroded face revealed the extent of the archaeological deposits, showing the presence of drystone walling, flooring, occupation levels, hearths, pits and middens. Structures were evident and the drawn section (fig 3) indicates the presence of primary features followed by sequences of tipping activity at the centre of the mound, and ultimately by settlement and structural remains. Both the primary and the tipping levels produced sherds of coarse, hand-made and badly-fired pottery similar to post-broch wares known from elsewhere in the Orkneys. The upper sequences yielded steatite. It would seem likely on this evidence that the site spans the significant Pictish/Norse interface period and for that reason alone is of pressing archaeological interest and importance. It should be added that the rate of erosion is alarming.

On the opposite side of the bay is the headland of Lamba Ness with an equally interesting

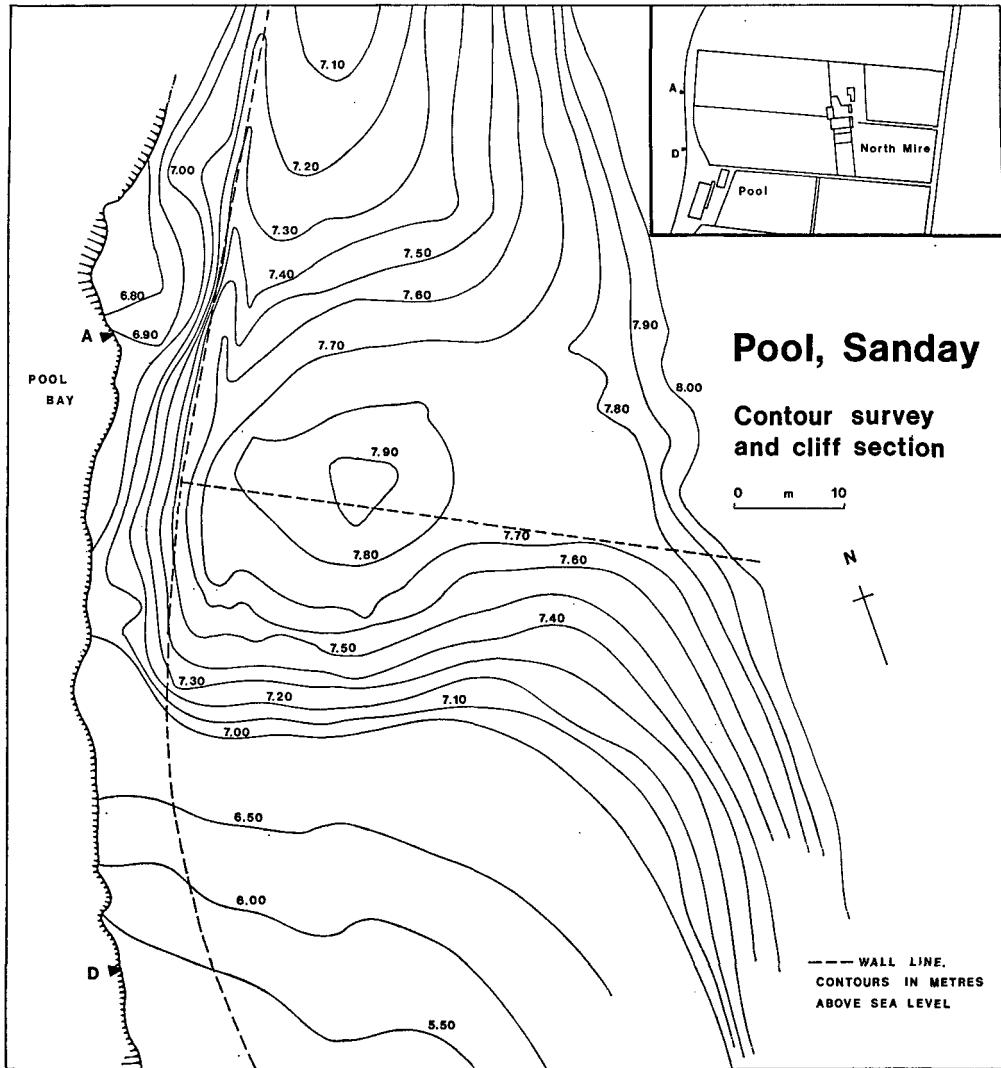


FIG 2

history of archaeological finds. Two burial sites are recorded in the vicinity and both are likely to belong to the Viking period. One (OAR no 336) contained two bronze tortoise brooches, a penannular brooch, a jet armband and an amber bead (Grieg 1940, 86–8; Shetelig 1954, 70) and the other (OAR no 337) a double-edged iron sword and an iron spearhead (Grieg 1940, 88; Shetelig 1954, 70). Both are recorded as being 10th-century burials. In each case the precise find-spots are unlocated although the National Museum of Antiquities records denotes both locations as being either at or near the 'Broch of Lamaness, Sanday'.

There is now no surviving evidence of this so-called broch on the headland and the records are more likely to relate to an irregular grass-covered mound (RCAMS 1946, ii, 43, no 180) variously described locally as a chapel or pict's house (HY 61383797) clearly visible on the land-

POOL, SANDAY Cliff Section

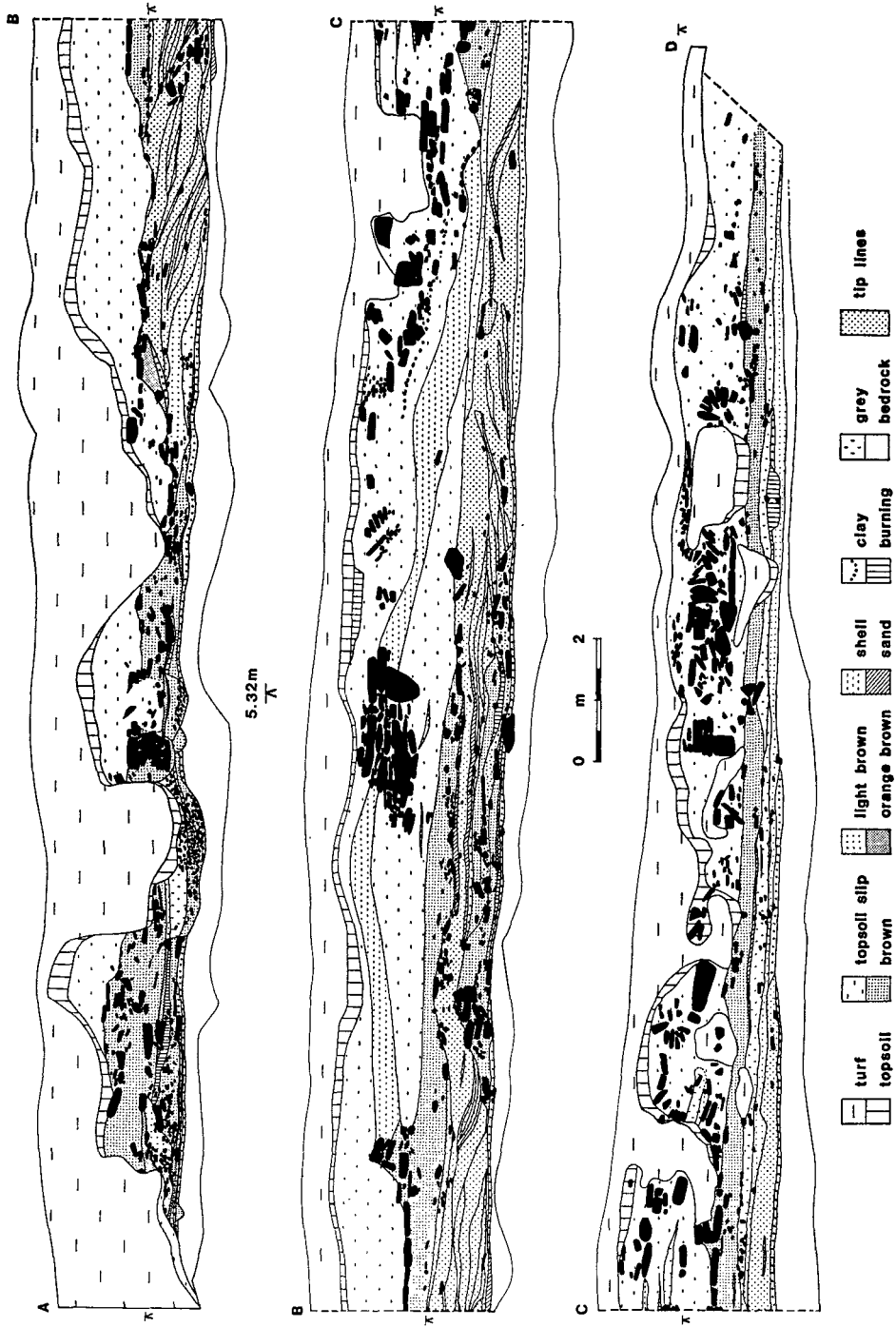


FIG 3

scape (Lamb 1980, no 179; OAR no 244). Despite the presence of a superimposed length of relatively modern walling the monument can be broadly interpreted as a sub-rectangular structure approximately $9\text{ m} \times 8\text{ m}$ with linear features running to the N and E (fig 4). The site is situated on the highest part of the headland with a steep bank running down to the modern plough-line to the S and SE. The general dimensions and position are appropriate to small ecclesiastical buildings

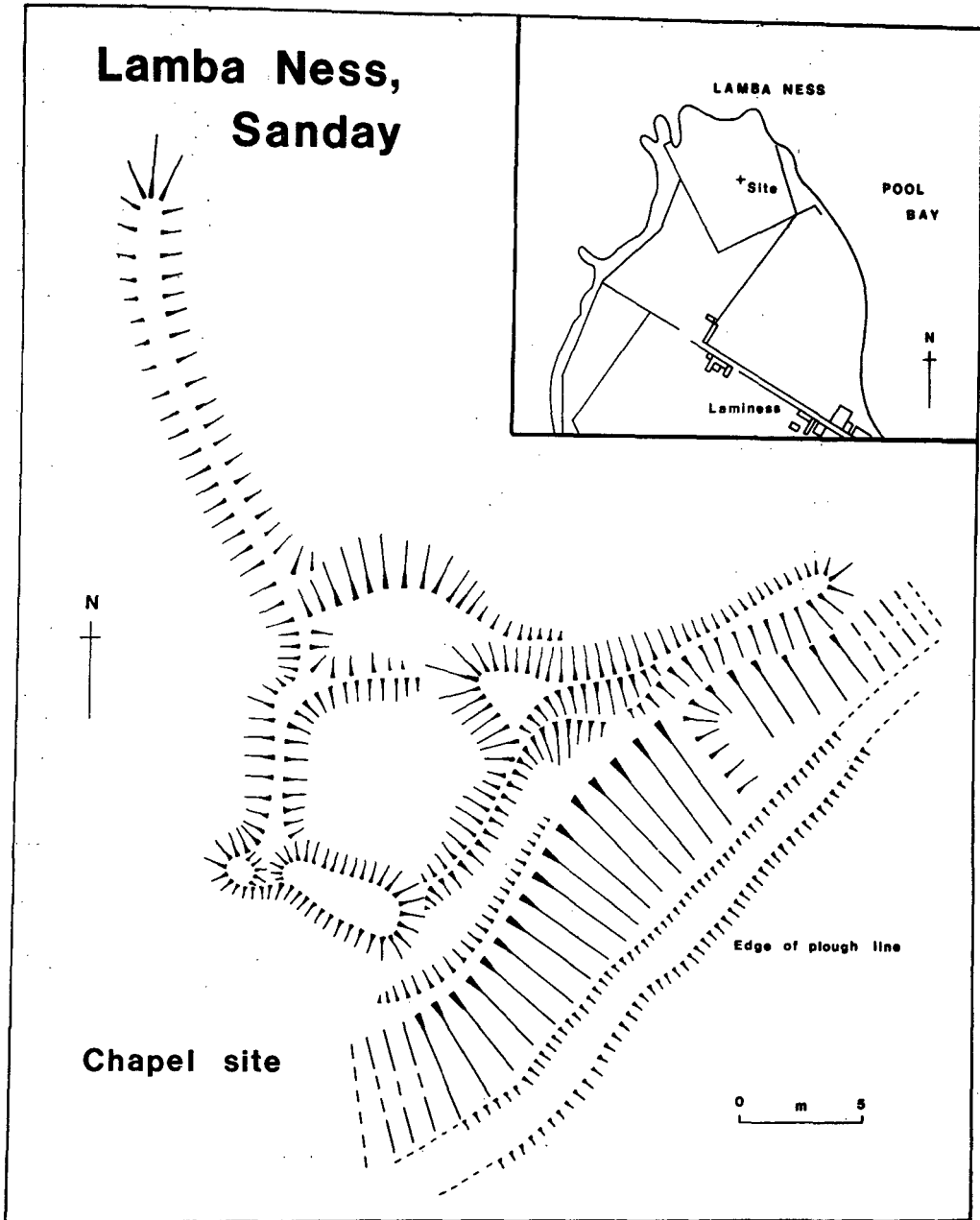


FIG 4

of the single cell type examples of which have been interpreted elsewhere among the Orkney islands. The proximity of the probable native and Norse occupation at Pool and the presence of Norse burials in the immediate area suggest that the site may be that of an *eyrisland* chapel supported by a leading local settler. This would place it within an ecclesiastical framework associated with Norse settlement predating the parish system of the 12th century. The monument itself is not closely datable and therefore there is no evidence to suggest that the original building was not of pre-Norse date. The feasibility of a Norse context rests on the grounds of the likely organization of the early Norse Church and on the associated archaeological environment which may arguably contain the focal settlement of a 'huseby' district (Steinnes 1959).

The site of the Ness of Brough consists of four mounds situated on the southern tip of the headland at a place known as the Styes of Brough (Lamb 1980, no 132; OAR no 324). They vary in diameter between approximately 15 m (mound 2) and 30 m (mound 4), their general shape having been disfigured by kelp burning activity and likely excavation (fig 5). Mound 4 (HY

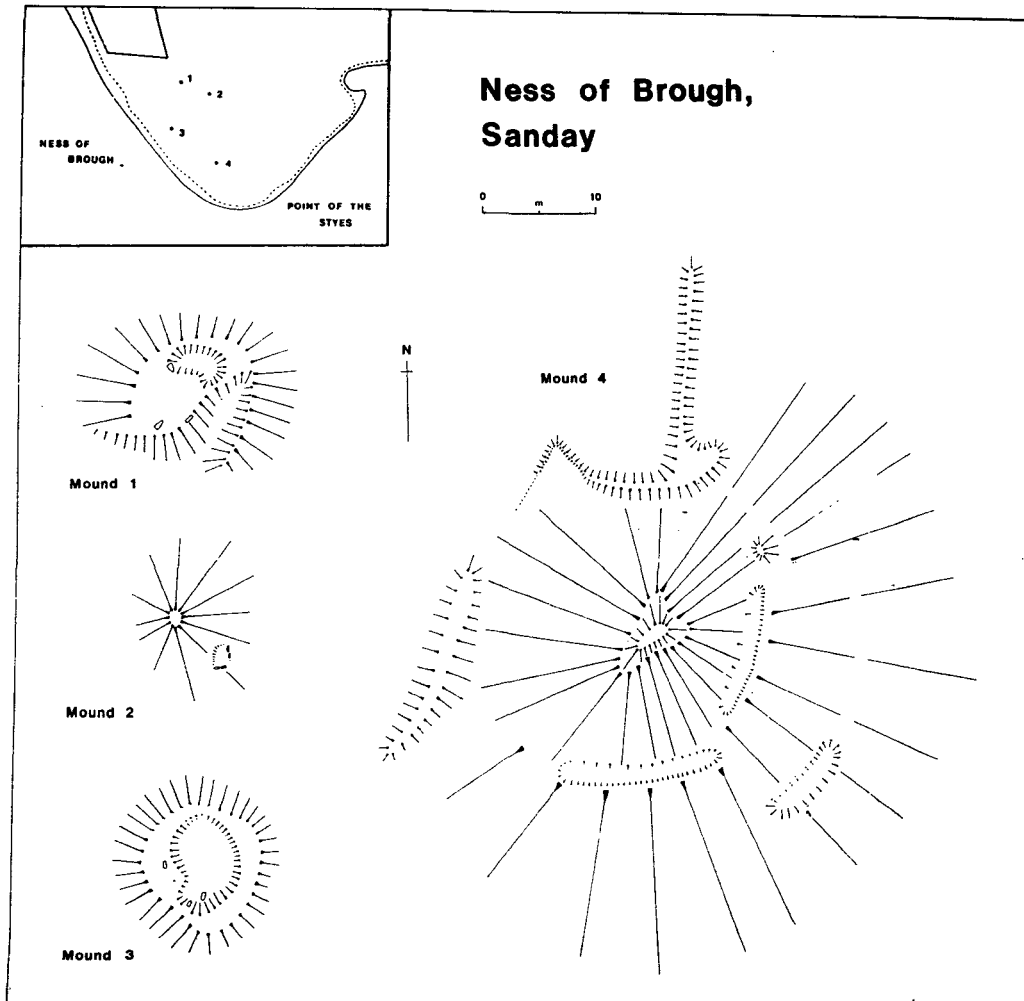


FIG 5

65474210) is over 2 m in height while the others are less than 0.5 m high, mound 2 being particularly slight. Mound 4 is situated on a small rise and is hence visible from a considerable distance. Its general shape can to some extent be gathered from the position of a series of curved quarry ditches which were possibly created during its construction. A possible boundary marker lies to the N. All four mounds are turf covered but mounds 1 and 3 show traces of protruding stonework which may suggest the presence of internal features. The dating of these mounds to the Norse period is based on a group of Viking period finds recorded from the area (OAR nos 325–7). These include an iron sword (Grieg 1940, fig 86) recorded as being found 'in a tumulus at Sties' (Anderson 1874, 556). Also recorded from the general location are an iron axe and an iron cauldron (Grieg 1940, 172). All three found their way to the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow in the early part of this century but only the sword can now be identified. In all three instances the find locations are unspecific but are likely to refer to the general area in which the four mounds stand. The mounds have clearly been disturbed and therefore an association is not altogether implausible. As Viking period burial mounds they would become an important and rare group of monuments in Orkney.

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