

Revisiting the earliest Viking settlement sites on Orkney

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The Viking Age on Orkney sees its beginning with larger scale settlement by Norse in the mid 9th century. Graves of pre-Christian Norse type date between c. 850 and 950 and are represented on grave fields as well as single graves. Orkney has the highest concentration of 'Viking' graves in Scotland. In contrast, early settlement sites are few and hybrid in character. The first Norse settlement sites on Orkney all display a mix of Pictish and Norse characteristics and artefact finds. Five sites have been identified for 9th century occupation; Buckquoy, Brough of Birsay, Saevar Howe, Pool of Sanday, and Skaill in Deerness. These sites have been interpreted as Norse based on architecture and building types and, with the exception of Buckquoy, on artefactual material. It is clear that early Norse settlement relates in some cases at least to important Pictish settlements – Norse settlement tends to be the last occupation phase of Pictish settlements of some significance. As such, they have often been taken as evidence of cultural dominance – a Norse takeover of important Pictish settlements, or as indication of a more hybrid nature of early Norse interactions on Orkney. Nonetheless, many of the sites that our interpretations are based on were excavated several decades ago, and were given Norse affiliation based on architecture/building types and artefact material, and there is a lack of absolute dates. Notwithstanding the difficulties in ascribing cultural identity through material culture, it must be noted that the chronological foundations of the phasing of many of these sites is shaky, even where C14 dates have been obtained. Recent archaeological work on Pictish sites across Mainland Scotland has resulted in a reappraisal of indigenous architectural traditions making some of the assumptions made of the Orcadian evidence less certain. Moreover, new direct dating of older assemblages such as that from Buckquoy has begun to provide a new picture of the settlement sequence of Orkney. This paper will review the evidence for the early Viking settlement of Orkney and outline the data available for appraising the Viking diaspora into northern Scotland.