COASTAL SETTLEMENTS OF THE NORTH

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Along the cliff-coasts of the Northern Isles there is a remarkable and little-known group of sites in the most ridiculous-seeming positions on high off-shore rock-stacks, on small inaccessible islets, and on precipitous head-lands joined to the mainland only by dangerous knife-edged ridges. Many of these are so inaccessible that they can be examined only through a tele-scope, but where it has been possible to visit them, they are found to have the common feature of squarish or oblong building-foundations of turf and stone. Although the sites vary in size and in the number of buildings, the similarity in shape and layout of these buildings, and the parallel circum-stances of siting, suggest that they belong to a group, and demand an explanation which will cover them as a group.

Perhaps the finest of these settlements is Kame of Isbister, Northmavine, Shetland (1). It is a peninsular rock projecting from a rugged cliff-coast, its only connection with the mainland being a narrow arête which formerly was traversed by a path, but cliff-falls within the last hundred years have destroyed this access. The rock is 120 ft high at the landward side and slopes at 1 in 3 down towards the sea, giving a sloping grass-grown area, which is not visible from the land, of four-fifths of an acre (Fig. 1). Along the bottom of the grass slope, which is still 50 ft above sea level, runs a wall or bank. On the upper part of the slope are concentrated most of the nineteen buildings now detectable. When a theology student named Cockburn visited the site in the 1870s, he recorded twenty-three buildings, but his trial trenches into two of them produced only signs of fires and 'a nail or some instrument of iron' (Gordon, 1878).

The Kame looks eastward across Yellsound, which here is about three miles wide; on the Yell shore directly opposite is Birrier of West Sandwick (Fig. 1). This is another, very similar, inaccessible arête promontory; its summit slopes at 1 in 4 from 130 ft on the landward side to 50 ft above the sea, giving a surface area rather less than one acre. There are traces of a wall running around the landward edge of the rock, and the settlement comprises thirteen oblong buildings.

At Aodann Mhor, Durness, Sutherland (Fig. 2), there is a similar settlement

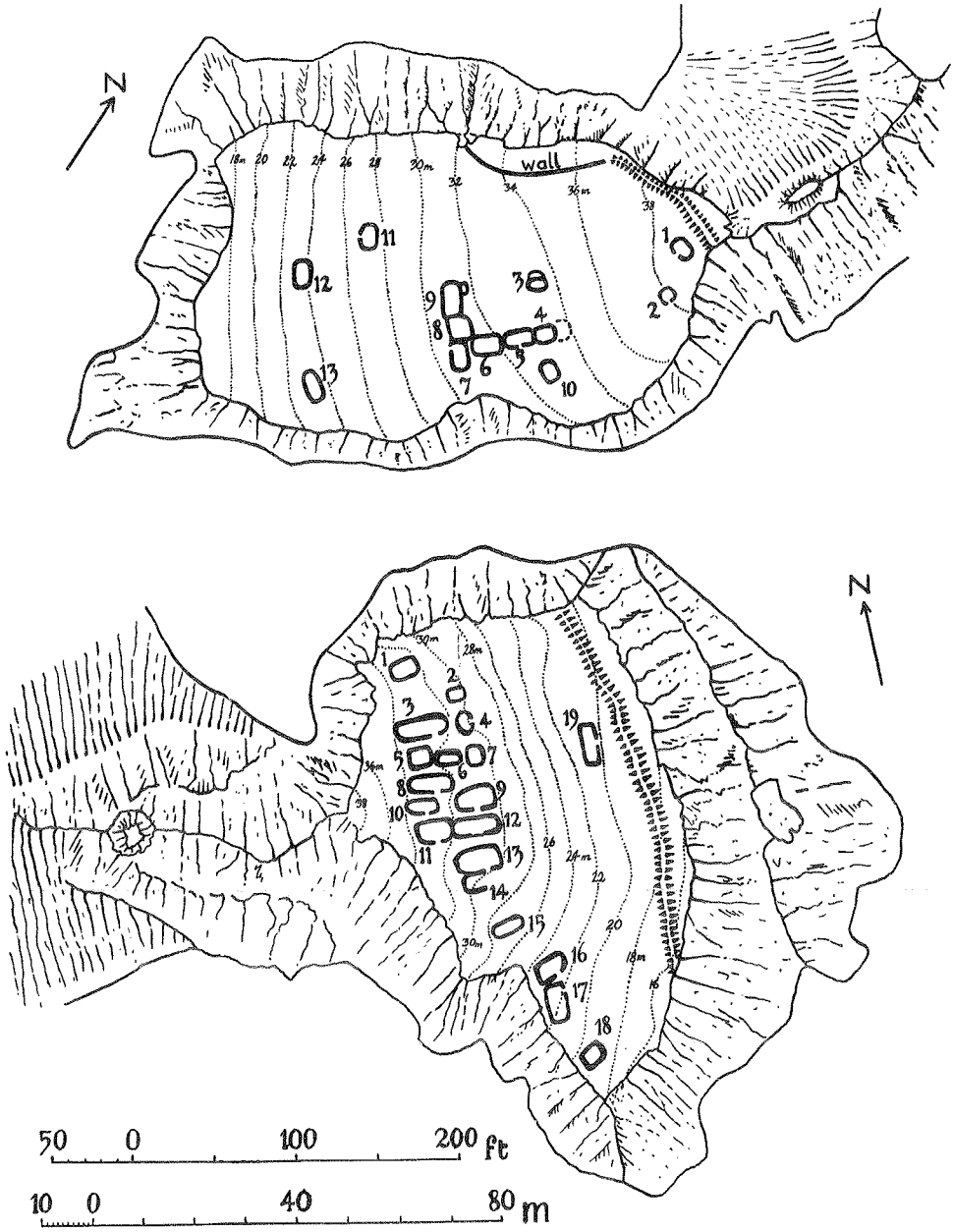

Figure 1. (Above) Birrier of West Sandwick (Yell); (below) Kame of Isbister; Northmavine (Shetland); from aerial surveys by Archaeology Division, Ordnance Survey, 1970. Crown Copyright reserved.

squeezed on to a much narrower promontory. The arête joining it to the mainland here is of a form slightly more climbable, and the site can, with care and good boots, be visited. The rock surface measures only 36 by 10 yds with at least a 45-degree slope to the sea, and the whole area has been cut into little terrace-platforms. There are eight of these in a row along the upper edge of the promontory, and traces of a second row lower down, almost entirely removed by wave-scour.

These three sites share the characteristics of isolation and difficulty of access. Aodann Mhor lies fairly near the crofting lands of Durness, but the two Shetland sites are backed by dark, deeply peat-covered moorland. In all three cases the promontory has a steep seaward slope, so that the settlement would have been near-invisible from the land. Although access along the ridges may originally have been easier, these never can have been easy or safe places to get on to or to live on; indeed, anyone who did choose to live on one, so completely at the mercy of wind and weather, would be committing himself to a life of privation hard to imagine.

The buildings are square to oblong. On Aodann Mhor the walls have been eroded away, and all that survives is the terraces, which average 10 ft square, with one oblong one at 10 by 20 ft. At Birrier of West Sandwick the buildings average 10 ft in width, but the length can be up to 20 ft; the length-breadth ratio in most cases is around 3:2 and never more than 2:1. These proportions hold good for Kame of Isbister with the exceptions of buildings 3 and 12 at 5:2, and 8 and 19 at nearly 3:1.

Similar groups of squarish or oblong buildings can be found on other kinds of coastal site, notably on holms or small islets, on cliff-headlands, and on completely isolated rock-stacks. On the high headland of Blue Mull, Unst, Shetland, there is a group of seven, side by side just as at Kame of Isbister, and a similar row can be made out in long grass on Castle of Burwick, South Ronaldsay, Orkney. A similar settlement probably existed on Sumburgh Head, Shetland (Low, 1774, 185), and oblong buildings are known to exist on the truly dreadful stack known as the Clett of Birrier, off the north coast of Fetlar (RCAMS, 1946, iii, 61, no. 1229). The precipitous Gloup Holm, off the North Neaps of Yell, probably had quite a large settlement of this type (RCAMS, 1946, iii, 167, no. 1746). A particularly interesting group occurs on Corn Holm, Deerness, Orkney.

Corn Holm today is under-grazed and the turf very thick, but under favourable conditions of light it is possible to make out a group of nearly

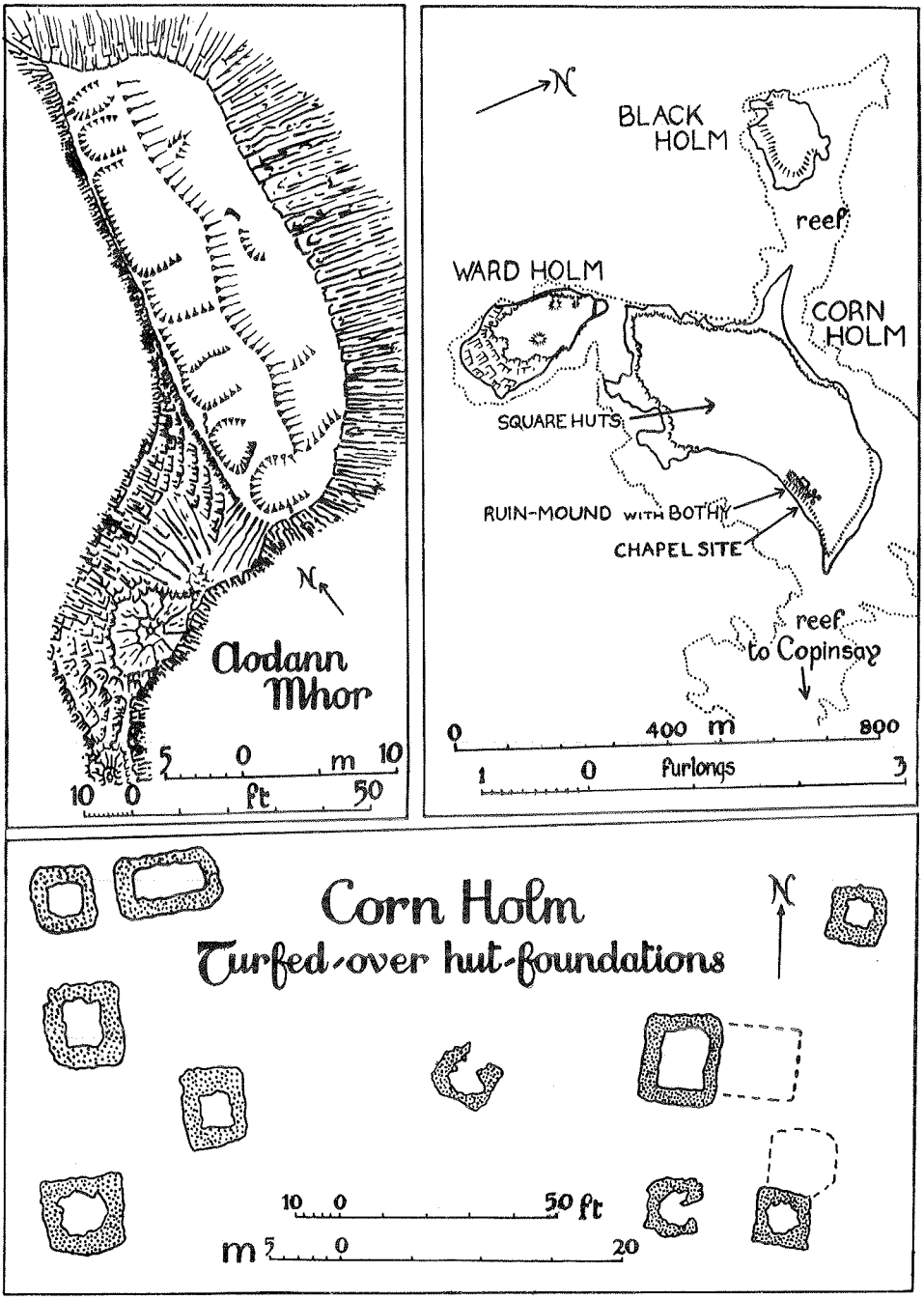

Figure 2. (Above, left) Arête promontory with terraced hut-platforms, Aodann Mhor, Durness (Sutherland); (above, right) the Corn Holm island-group, Deerness (Orkney), with (below) some of the square hut-footings.

square huts, in size and layout recalling Birrier of West Sandwick. The plan (Fig. 2) shows ten out of thirteen so far located by the writer. They average 20 ft square overall, the length however generally exceeding the width by 2-3 ft, and one of the group is rather more oblong than the rest (see also RCAMS, 1946, ii, 250, no. 672). They seem to form two groups on slightly different alignments.

The sites demand a common explanation, and it is notable that previous attempts to explain individual ones, have been various and contrived. Kame of Isbister, and the Shetland Kirkholm (see Appendix), have been suggested as seasonal fishing-stations, but even Low (1774, 85) could not accept this idea. They occur on such precipitous and dangerous stretches of coast, far from harbour facilities, that any such use is inconceivable. It has been suggested that they may be fowlers' huts. Small clochans are used by the fowlers during the annual gannet-hunt on Sule Sgeir, but this is an exceptional circumstance; the distance of the Sgeir from the population centre, Ness in Lewis, which exploits the gannetry, makes necessary a week's stay on the rock. In Shetland the fowling cliffs were within daily reach and there would have been no need to go to the trouble of building huts on such dreadful places. One may be sure that, had anything of the kind taken place, there would be local memories of it. The fact that the sites, where any local explanation is offered, are described as 'Pictish' is a strong indication of antiquity.

The settlements cannot be interpreted as forts; although some of them have low parapets screening them from the land, these seldom are of a size and disposition fit to be called defensive. The Corn Holm site is completely unprotected, the low-lying islet giving no security against seaborne attack; while the sites on stacks would have been as inconvenient and dangerous for the defenders as for an attacker. Iron Age promontory forts do occur in the Northern Isles where the writer has made an intensive study of them. They bear no resemblance to these settlements and their siting is different. With very few exceptions the forts have a distribution corresponding to that of brochs, being found near good agricultural land and not, as the settlements so often are, in regions of desolate moorland. Indeed, one hardly can avoid the conclusion that these places, perched eyrie-like on dreadful stacks and dangerous headlands, were selected by someone who wished to achieve utter isolation with minimal standards of comfort. It is very notable that many of the sites are chosen with a seaward downslope, so that the inhabitants could not be overlooked from the land, and themselves had an immediate view only

of empty sea.

The name Kirkholm, in Shetland, is of obvious interest, and Kirkholm was an alternative name also of Corn Holm, which had a chapel, and is still regarded as a vaguely holy place. George Low in 1774 evidently was aware of this, for he was prompted to suggest that the square huts were 'possibly the cells of ecclesiasticks' (1774, 47). The chapel however lay a furlong from the hut-group; its site is located by the six-inch map of 1905 beside a great ruin-mound which probably contains an important Norse and later mediaeval settlement (which itself may have been monastic). Probably the stone-built chapel was associated with this Norse site and had no direct connection with the square huts. But its presence on so small an island does suggest some ancient sanctity.

There is little about the buildings themselves to date the settlements. With their not too long, or nearly square, proportions, they do not suggest Norse houses. Such forms do occur in Norse contexts, but usually only as subsidiary buildings in farmsteads where the main house is of larger and more elaborate construction (e.g. buildings 1B, 1E, 1F, subsidiary to houses 1 and 2, in Jarlshof phase II; Hamilton, 1956, fig. 61 opposite p.130). It might be claimed that since the settlements evidently are very specialised, and not comparable with farmsteads like Jarlshof, there could perhaps be a large number of such buildings on a Norse site. But it is difficult to imagine what the sites could be, if they are not monastic, and we may be confident that they are not monasteries of the Norse period. Several sites described later in this paper are identified as Norse monasteries, and these have a very different layout, with that same variety of building-forms which we associate also with farms. The difference is illustrated by the diagram in the Appendix.

The actual plans of the buildings, with their rounded corners and not too long proportions, resemble more closely the Hebridean blackhouse than the Norse longhouse. They may, therefore, belong to a milieu which is not Norse - which in Orkney or Shetland must mean pre-Norse. They may represent a building-type locally current in the pre-Norse period, represented by such structures as Hower, Papa Westray (Traill and Kirkness, 1937) and Wag of Forse, Caithness (Curle, 1946). An interesting group of remains at Tobar Childa, St Kilda (Williamson and Boyd, 1960, 54 - 66), known to be earlier than the seventeenth century, may represent a similar development. There is an obvious parallel between our buildings and those of the similarly-sited and enigmatic settlement of Gateholm, Pembrokeshire

(Lethbridge and David, 1930; Davies, Hague and Hogg, 1971). At Sceilg Mhichíl itself, the building-tradition surely is a rectangular, not a circular, one, for the internal ground-plan of the cells is square. It is not claimed that all or any of these things are interrelated; it is sufficient to note that rectangular building-traditions are present in Atlantic Britain in contexts which probably are not Norse. The suggestion then is that the settlements are pre-Norse eremitic monasteries. This explanation would cover both their extravagant location and their layout, the groups of small uniform buildings indeed suggesting 'the cells of ecclesiasticks'. Problems are the absence of obvious churches and the apparent contrast between the oblong turf-and-stone buildings and the conventional idea of the Celtic hermit's beehive cell.

These turf-and-stone buildings may have been roofed with turf, and would perhaps have looked rather like the old Icelandic kofi illustrated by Bruun (1928, 285). The cells on the type-site of eremitic monasteries, Sceilg Mhichíl, have a near-square internal ground-plan, averaging 10-12 ft across inside. The squarish Corn Holm huts, and all but the largest on Birrier and the Kame, also as far as can be judged those on Aodann Mhor, had very similar internal dimensions, and floor areas within the same range (see Appendix). Essentially, then, these buildings represent units equivalent to the Sceilg Mhichíl cells. The distinction between cells and oratories on Sceilg Mhichíl is expressed only by shape, and in floor area the two oratories are actually more modest than most of the cells. It is not a great step from here, where ground-plans are rectangular except for the exterior outlines of the cells, to Corn Holm or Birrier, where all the buildings are entirely rectangular. But this step entirely removes the only criterion by which cells and oratories, if both types of buildings occur on these sites, could be distinguished. In other words, if Sceilg Mhichíl is typical, we need not expect to find on the northern sites buildings marked out by their size as chapels. It is worth noting that the tiny oratory on Sule Sgeir (Muir, 1885, 95-8) had a ground-plan identical with our buildings.

It would be interesting to know whether any of these northern settlements survived into the Norse period. The probability is that they did not. The lack of traditional information about them - although this is due largely to the uninhabited or depopulated condition of the surrounding districts - suggests that they came to an end at a time sufficiently long ago for all memory of them to have lapsed. But not quite all: for an interesting glimmer has survived in Northmavine concerning the Kame of Isbister. This is called a 'Pictish graveyard' (2). This definitely is significant, for such a

place normally would be called, if anything, a Brough; and as it is a most improbable site for a graveyard no Shetlander would have invented the story. Furthermore, the remains visible on the Kame (which within the last hundred years was still accessible) are clearly those of buildings; there is nothing about them to suggest graves. The story assumes meaning when we realise that 'graveyard' in Shetland is synonymous with 'kirkyard'; for most if not all graveyards are old kirkyards, even where the kirk itself has become disused and ruinous. 'Kirkyard' would be the nearest thing in the crofters' imagination to the rather abstract (and after the Reformation probably unheard-of) concept of 'monastery'. It would have been rationalised into 'graveyard' when people began to question why ever there should have been a kirk in so unlikely a place. That it is called 'Pictish' is suggestive of its antiquity.

The Small Stack Sites. The settlements so far described would be classed as 'eremitic monasteries' or 'communal hermitages'. There is another class of sites which are found - or rather seen - on the summits of veritable pillars of rock, with space for but a single building, and today utterly inaccessible. A good example is provided by the nearer of the two stacks in Burri Geo at Culswick in Shetland. Around the edge of the stack is a considerable parapet, which so far as can be judged through a telescope, has been built of turf and material excavated from the centre of the flat summit. The top of the stack thus is given the form of a hollow in which nestles a small rectangular dry-stone building. Culswick now is depopulated and the writer has been unable to find anyone who could give any account of the place. Structures are visible on many other small stacks around the coasts of Orkney and Shetland. Without close examination - which means mountaineering - their nature cannot be determined. It is interesting however that nearly all of them occur along the same lengths of coast where we find also the larger monastic settlements. In Orkney this is the Pentland Firth shore and the eastern seaboard of the archipelago, in Shetland it means the Sandsting-Walls-Sandness peninsula and the North Isles. Three-quarters of a mile south from the Brough of Deerness in Orkney is an insular rock called Moustag, and on it is visible a low circular foundation. This seems too insubstantial to be the remains of a broch (for which a stack in any event is a most unlikely site), yet too large in diameter to be a hut. Something very similar can be made out on the summit of Dinnacair, a stack rock in a bay just south of Stonehaven (Kincardineshire).

Dinnacair is of especial interest because we have an indication of the period of its occupation, in the form of Pictish symbol stones. These were found

on the summit in 1832 by a local lad, who tossed them down into the rock-pools; they were recovered by an antiquary, and since then have served as garden-ornaments at a house in Stonehaven. The symbols are crudely incised on rough boulders, and there is nothing specifically Christian about them. Simpson suggested that Dinnacair was a hermitage dependent upon a large monastery which he believed had occupied the site of nearby Dunnottar Castle (Thompson, 1860; Simpson, 1968, 2-3). Short of rock-climbing, one can do nothing to check the theory; but the proximity of Moustag to the Brough of Deerness may suggest a parallel case.

The idea of living on a stack, as an extreme form of self-denial, surely would have been in keeping with the ascetic ideals of early monasticism, particularly after the Culdee revival. Something of the kind - although in an urban setting and less rigorous climate - had been practised by the early Byzantine stylites or pillar-saints. The layout of the Burri Stack, with its small building nestling within the hollow formed by an enclosing wall, recalls Bede's description of Cuthbert's hermitage in the Farne Islands (Life of Cuthbert, XVII). The idea that the occupation of the stacks is monastic is reinforced by the cross-slab from Holm of Noss (Thomas, 1971, 118-19). Holm of Noss is a truly dreadful stack, but it used to be visited by means of a primitive cable-car in order to take advantage of the patch of grazing it offered. This doubtless is how the slab came to be found; but why it should have been there (Thomas interprets it as a grave-marker) is quite baffling, unless the stack had been the site of one of these hermitages.

The Context of the Settlements. There is little about the settlements themselves to suggest their historical context. Presumably the buildings include cells and oratories; whether any of the specialised monastic buildings, suggested by textual evidence, are present in Orkney and Shetland, is more doubtful. Probably these utterly eremitical settlements are not complex, and in organisation do most closely resemble Sceilg Mhichíl. The bank or parapet which seals off some of them - Birrier, Blue Mull, Aodann Mhor - from the land side, could be regarded as a 'vallum monasterii'; but it probably is more significant that the sites themselves are chosen so as not to be visible from the land.

The decision we face is whether seaborne Christianity, as manifested in these settlements, reached the Northern Isles from the east or from the west. The sites were selected away from centres of population, and with apparent disregard for the farming potential of the nearby land (the

economic basis probably was provided by seabirds). They were not, therefore, founded by missionaries whose purpose was to convert the native population. Such missions undoubtedly there were; but the movement which founded the eremitic monasteries was either completely separate from, or else an offshoot of, the missionary activity.

A movement unrelated to such missionary activity would suggest the Irish peregrini, who were responsible for the discovery and initial settlement of the Faeroe Islands and Iceland. The man who sets out 'in mari herimum quaesiturus' appears twice in Adamnan's Life of Columba, as Cormac in I, 6 and Baitan in I, 20. Dicuil however (De Mensura Orbis Terrae, VII, 7-15) suggests that the settlement of Faeroe and Iceland took place about a hundred years before his own time, which would suggest the early eighth century as the time of this northward voyaging activity. The initial chapters of Islendingabók and Landnámabók confirm that Irish eremites were present in Iceland immediately before the Norse settlement. The recent evidence from Tjørnuvík however has suggested that Dicuil may have been conservative in his estimate; for it now looks as if people, who at this time are most likely to have been anchorites, were living in Faeroe not long after AD 600 (Jóhansen, 1971).

If the Tjørnuvík conclusion is correct, it will create a certain difficulty in the chronology of the Northern Isles settlements; for Adamnan (II, 42), in his account of the voyages of Cormac, seems aware that Orkney towards the end of the sixth century was an unhealthy place for anchorites. There is no suggestion that the near-disastrous adventure of Cormac was immediately followed by more successful Christian visits, and one might have to reckon with the Tjørnuvík settlement being established possibly before Christianity reached Orkney and Shetland. We may note in passing that Tjørnuvík had a farming economy, while the inhabitants of eremitic monasteries in the Northern Isles most likely subsisted on seabirds. And although on such slender evidence one hesitates to propose a firm dating, the very extreme ascetic practices which these settlements stand for, do rather suggest a later period, possibly the eighth century, when the Culdee revival had made itself felt.

The alternative interpretation of the sites is as offshoots of missionary activity originating in Pictland. Thomas has recently proposed a possible outline for early Christian organisation in Shetland (Small et al., 1973, 9), which would provide a context for eremitic monasteries and stack-hermitages. If indeed Papil was a monastery, its siting on Burra, with its farming and

fishing resources, suggests a close relationship with the native community. The sculptured stones from Papil suggest contacts with the east, not the west, side of Britain; their art is Pictish, and is suggestive of that eighth-century period when the Pictish church itself was under Northumbrian influence. This direction of contact is borne out by the Orkney symbol stones and by the St Ninians Isle treasure, although neither symbol stones nor treasure is specifically Christian. They do however corroborate the very slender historical evidence that the Northern Isles were part of the kingdom of the Picts, and it is reasonable therefore to suppose that Christian missionaries most likely would have come this way.

Precisely because the eremitic monasteries are so withdrawn from centres of population, we cannot easily link them with the missionary sites - the 'developed cemeteries' and so on. Until more fieldwork has been done on these, we do not have the material to allow a comparison of the distributions of the two classes of site. It may be of interest that 'papa' place-names in Shetland, which here seem nearly all to refer to the missionary, not the eremitic, Christianity, do however have the same overall distribution as the eremitic sites, being commonest in the west and north of the archipelago and very scarce in the south and east. These names as a body of evidence have certain inherent dangers and must be used with caution. If we had a distribution map of early Christian centres in populous areas, we could compare it with the distribution of the eremitic settlements to see whether there is any relationship. Lacking such a map we can do very little.

In conclusion, we can say only that there is a large and uniform group of coastal settlements, characterised by squarish or oblong buildings and by siting in remote, desolate, and often quite dreadful places. The small size and uniformity of the buildings within each settlement, further suggest that the sites are eremitic monasteries, comparable with the Irish type-site of Sceilg Mhichíl, and with them is associated a class of smaller settlements on narrower and even nastier stacks, which may be individual hermitages. The establishment of these settlements could be seen as an aspect of the expansion of Irish anchorites into the North Atlantic, related to the discovery and settlement of Faeroe and Iceland. One cannot, however, rule out the possibility that they are in some way associated with the Christian sites which were established in populated areas by missionaries whose contacts were with Pictland.

Monasteries of the Norse period. The settlements so far described, with large numbers of uniform and not very elongated buildings, may be con-

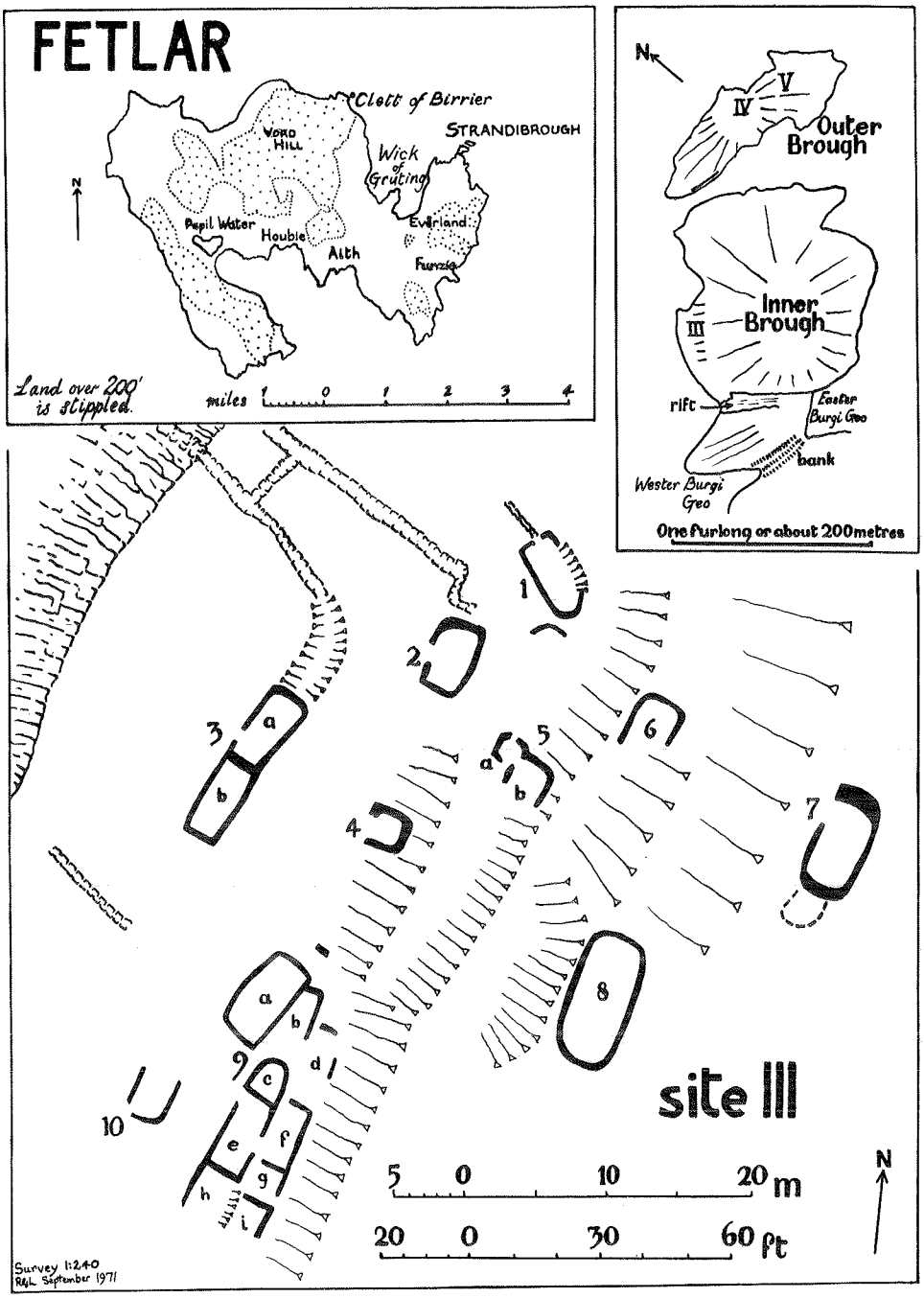

Figure 3. Strandibrough, Fetlar (Shetland); plan of the buildings on Site III, Inner Brough, with overall sketch-plan, and map indicating position of site.

trasted with several sites which are similar in general circumstances, but which carry buildings of characteristically Norse form. The largest of these Norse settlements is Strandibrough, which forms the north-eastern extremity of the Shetland island of Fetlar. Strandibrough (Figs. 3-4) consists of a precipitous islet, the Outer Brough, lying off a steep headland, the Inner Brough, which itself is isolated from the main by a natural rift. Across the narrow isthmus landward of the rift there is a considerable earthwork, and there are Norse buildings on the two Broughs, sites III, IV and V. Unlike those of the earlier settlements, these buildings show a wide range of shapes and sizes, varying between small huts like III nos. 4, 5, 6 and longhouses such as IV nos. 1, 2 and V no. 5; there also are two complex buildings, III no. 9 and IV no. 3. This varied layout - leaving aside the complex ranges - recalls that of Jarlshof in for example the twelfth-thirteenth century period (Hamilton, 1956, fig. 79 opposite p.170), and has even better parallels in Iceland among old farmstead sites recorded by Daniel Bruun (1928). The size of the settlement, and its extraordinary siting on a bleak headland and stack, however make it clear that this is no normal Viking farmstead. Strandibrough at some time has dominated this corner of the island. The land round about is excellent pasture which the present farmer thinks at some time has been arable, which is curious as there never has been a croft within nearly a mile of the headland (3). The nearest inhabited farm today is Everland, right on the southern boundary of the old Strand scattald; and although this scattald once contained another seven farms, all of these were concentrated in this southern part, leaving the vicinity of Strandibrough itself uninhabited. It is surprising too that at the Wick of Gruting - Fetlar's nearest approximation to a sheltered harbour - there is no trace of settlement. With its bay-head beach it ought to have attracted some powerful Norseman. But the bay is empty, and the settlement instead is perched on the inconvenient and shelterless headland of Strandibrough. In sheer size it is too big to be the farmstead of any but the most powerful man. If such a Norseman were to have built himself a farm in this part of the island, one surely would expect it to have been at Gruting. The siting of Strandibrough is most uncharacteristic of a leading Norseman's residence, but it makes good sense as a monastery.

We have no documents from which any monastery may be identified in Orkney or Shetland. Only one monastery, Eynhallow, has been identified in the field, and even here the interpretation of the buildings is controversial. But taking into account the vigour of the Church in the Northern Isles during the twelfth and thirteenth century, it would be surprising if Eynhallow were the only monastery to have flourished there. In Iceland there were at least

a dozen religious houses, and there were even two in Greenland. Their apparent absence from Orkney and Shetland therefore must be considered suspect.

Because of the extreme depopulation of Fetlar, no tradition concerning Strandibrough seems to have survived there. On Papa Stour however there is good evidence for a mediaeval religious house sited on a pair of offshore rocks known as Maiden Stack and Brei Holm. On Maiden Stack there is a single building, 36 ft by 13 ft, with a cross-wall, and on Brei Holm there are seven, of which the largest, also with a cross-wall, is 65 ft by 13 ft (4). These sound very like Norse longhouses. Two distinct traditions are preserved, one of which identifies the buildings as a leper hospital. Leprosy survived in Shetland into the eighteenth century and lepers often were isolated in specially-built houses in remote places. There is however no evidence of any other leper colony on a stack - in Shetland it is easy to achieve isolation without going to such lengths. This may be another instance of the translation of the unfamiliar concept of 'monastery', into something more familiar. Possibly the story remembers just one aspect of the work of the monastic community. A more interesting story however has been recorded by Samuel Hibbert (1822, 285):

> 'One of these insulated rocks, named Frau-a-stack or the Lady's Stack - accessible to none but the best of climbers - is crowned on the summit by the remains of a small building, which was originally built by a Norwegian Lady, to preserve herself from the solicitations of suitors, when she had entered into a vow of pure celibacy. The ascent to the house was considered almost unsurmountable, except by the help of ropes. But a dauntless lover, an udaller from Islesburgh, contrived in the dark secrecy of evening to scale the stack, and, after the first surprise was overcome, so far ingratiated himself in the fair devotee's affections, that, in a fatal hour, she was induced
>
> To trust the opportunity of night
> And the ill counsel of a desert place
> With the rich worth of her virginity.
>
> When the consequence of the Lady's faux pas could no longer be concealed, Frau-a-stack became the scoff of the island, and was deserted by its fair and frail tenant. The house was soon afterwards unroofed and reduced to ruin, in contempt of the vow of chastity that had been broken'.

Hibbert's story is corroborated by his rendering of the name, of which he evidently has heard the original Norn form (on frú in Shetland Norn, see Jakobsen, 1921, 192). The Maiden Stack and Brei Holm settlement, then,

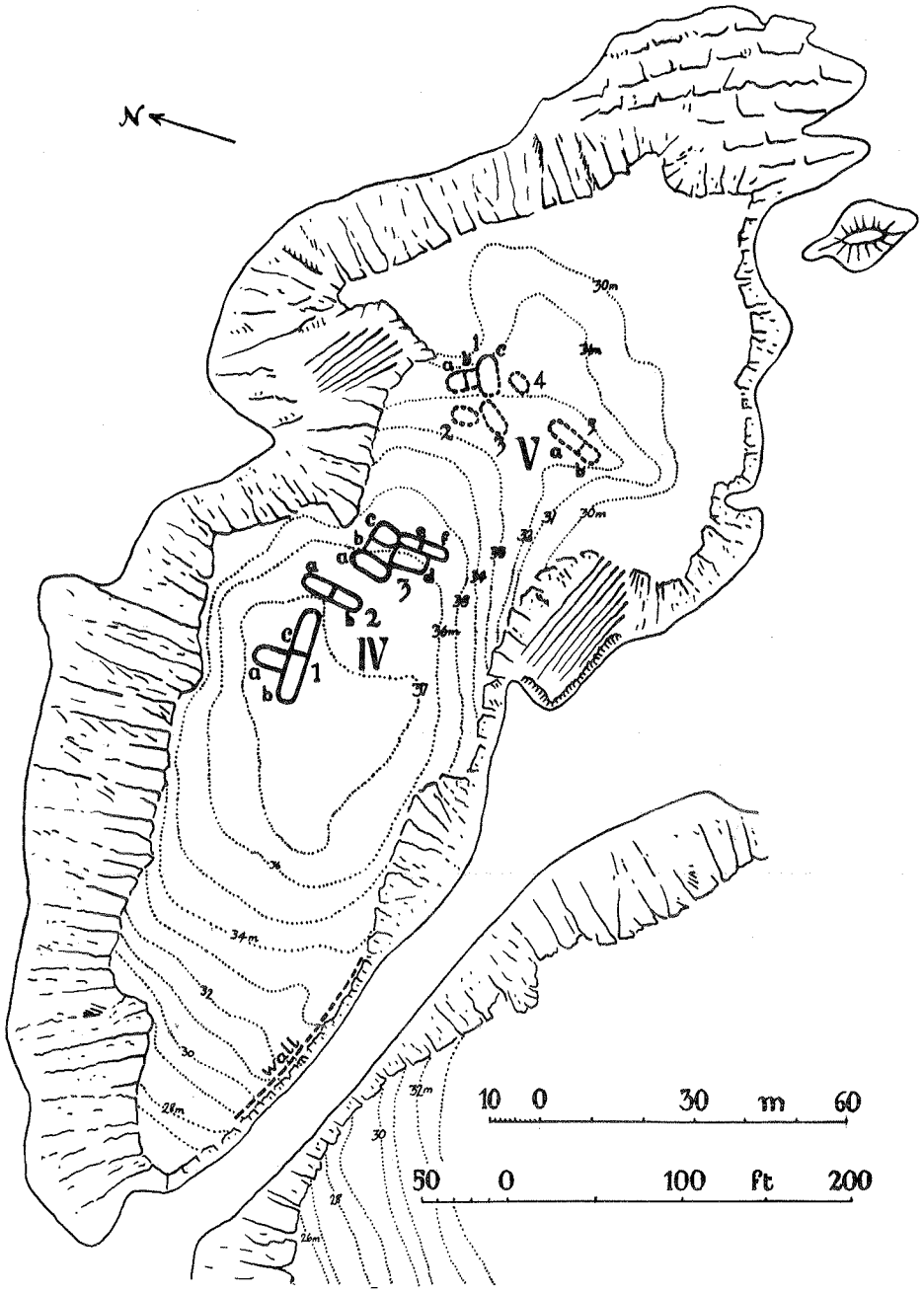

Figure 4. Outer Brough of Strandibrough (Sites IV-V), Fetlar (Shetland); from aerial survey by Archaeology Division, Ordnance Survey, 1970. Crown Copyright reserved.

probably was a nunnery.

Of particular interest at Strandibrough are the two complex structures, III no. 9 and IV no. 3. The latter gives the impression of having grown up haphazardly; it is not unlike the buildings between the Cathedral and the cliff edge on the Brough of Birsay (Radford, 1959, 20). III no. 9 by contrast - except perhaps for rooms a, b, and d - looks like a homogeneously planned structure. This building-plan, with two parallel and adjacent rows of rooms, is most atypical of the Northern Isles and represents an idea more particularly associated with the Norse settlements in Greenland. Good parallels are provided by the byre-ranges at Sandnes (Roussell, 1936). It is similar also to the ground-plan of the complex of rooms beside the church at Eynhallow, which have been interpreted as post-Reformation domestic buildings (RCAMS, 1946, ii, 230-4, no. 613). It is true that these bear little resemblance to the conventional idea of a monastery, but neither are they very like traditional Orkney domestic or farm buildings. The complex plan is best parallelled at Strandibrough and in Greenland.

Known religious houses in Iceland and Greenland bear no resemblance to the great monasteries of Europe. The two in the Eastern Settlement of Greenland are known from Ivar Bardarson's account of c.1360, an Augustinian monastery at Ketilsfjord and a Benedictine nunnery at nearby Ramsnesfjord. The Augustinian house was very small; the buildings are loosely grouped around a six-sided enclosure containing a small church, the main dwelling having been identified as a large mound with associated midden. Nearby are outbuildings and livestock pens. Roussell (1941, 50) observes that 'the brotherhood in Greenland must simply have lived on an ordinary farm, where the prior was master, but where, in addition to the usual farm duties, they lived according to precepts which perhaps were not observed too strictly. We know nothing of the spiritual influence of the monastery on its surroundings, or if it occupied a leading position in agriculture as many monasteries did in Europe'.

The Benedictine nunnery was a larger establishment, comprising a church in its enclosure, a large dwelling, and farm buildings (Vebæk). The main house was contained within a ruin-mound 80 m long and 20 to 25 m wide; it was an enormous longhouse subdivided into many compartments. Unfortunately the published details do not allow a close comparison with Strandibrough. The main point about both Greenland sites however is that they looked like ordinary farms, and indeed without the literary record it would

have been impossible to recognize them out of the farm-church associations which are common in Greenland.

In the Scandinavian world, before Romanesque influence altered the fashion, the most prestigious building material was timber. The better mediaeval churches in Iceland were entirely timber-built, unlike the post-Reformation ones which, erected under circumstances of comparative poverty, were built with a turf casing, like traditional farm buildings. In Greenland however timber was harder to come by, and the first church there, the one erected by Eric the Red's wife Thjodhild in the early eleventh century, was a turf one (Krogh, 1967, 19-37). Subsequent churches were of stone, but the Greenland builders long retained the practice of making the west wall - the show facade - of timber, and on it doubtless they lavished a good deal of decorative carving. The monastic churches at Ketilsfjord and Ramsnesfjord both had this timber wall. Only in the very latest Greenland churches - Anavîk, Brattahlið III, Hvalsey - was all-stone construction considered acceptable.

The Norse establishment in Orkney became Christian during the reign of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty (c.1020-65), and church architecture there from the start was under Romanesque influence. Shetland shared far less in the architectural activity which followed, and it is probable that Strandibrough, on its remote headland in the North Isles, was little affected by it. At any rate, all the surviving buildings there look thoroughly Norse. Particularly interesting are III nos. 4, 5b, 6 and 10, all of which seem to have one wall missing. In each case the three surviving walls are very distinct while there is absolutely no trace of a fourth wall; this therefore is unlikely to be an accident of destruction. These buildings probably resembled Icelandic farm outbuildings, with the fourth wall of timber (e.g. Bruun, 1928, 173, 188). If timber was thus used at Strandibrough, it is likely that this settlement would have had a Scandinavian-style all-timber church - which would explain the lack of visible traces of a church there. This circumstance seems to apply also to the undocumented Icelandic monastic site of Hraunþúfuklaustur (Bruun, 1928, 155-6), which looks like any other ruined farmstead, and where it is unlikely that any of the foundations planned by Bruun actually is the church.

Eynhallow is a rather exceptional case. The basic conception of the monastery is Norse but because it is so near to Kirkwall, where a magnificent Romanesque cathedral was going up, it has developed certain architectural pretensions. It has many remarkable features, but there is not space here

to discuss them at length except for one, the chancel arch. This, like all the buildings on Eynhallow, is built of dry masonry, and the principle on which it is constructed is both crude and ingenious. It uses three triangular-hewn pieces of freestone to form springers and keystone, the remainder of the stones being shaped only by splitting. This is a method of reproducing the newly fashionable pointed arch, without the use of mortar, and with the minimum of cut stone. Exactly the same device was used to form the pointed arch of the east window at Hvalsey, the only Greenland church which is fairly well preserved. There is a parallel of circumstance between two relatively poor communities who, lacking the resources to execute newly fashionable architectural ideas, did their best with the materials and skills locally available. Eynhallow therefore may be regarded as a Norse monastery, conceived in the same tradition as Ramsnesfjord or Strandibrough, but built according to architectural standards which, as at Hvalsey, were no longer entirely Norse (5).

It is only reasonable to expect monasteries in Orkney and Shetland to resemble those in Iceland and Greenland. All these areas are Norse colonies and all came under the archepiscopal see of Trondheim. The local bishops' seats of Garðar in Greenland and Birsay in Orkney fall into the same general class of site as the monasteries and have a similar layout. The palace of Skálholt in Iceland, according to an old drawing, preserved this layout to the eighteenth century (Bruun, 1928, 200-5). The significant differences are in the cathedrals. While at Birsay the church was stone-built, Skalhólt continued the Scandinavian tradition of an all-timber one, while Garðar in both its periods followed the normal Greenland practice of a stone church with timber west wall.

The church at Eynhallow, and the Strandibrough buildings, may be dated in the twelfth and earlier thirteenth centuries. Possibly they belong to the same general context as the Iceland monasteries, the great majority of which were founded within a period of about a hundred years, roughly 1130 to 1230 (Jóhannesson, 1956, 227-36). There is little chance of finding out to which Orders the Orkney and Shetland houses belonged, but it may be noted that the foundations in Iceland and Greenland were all either Benedictine or Augustinian.

Here at last we may mention the Brough of Deerness (RCAMS, 1946, ii, 240-1, no. 621). This headland remained a place of pilgrimage long after the Reformation; it has a stone chapel, and foundations of buildings ascribed to a Celtic monastery. The oratory in its rectangular enclosure

is without doubt Norse, probably of this same twelfth to thirteenth century period. Of the same date surely are the longhouses with cross-walls, and the remaining rectangular buildings are nearly all larger than those of the pre-Norse sites. The diagram, Fig. 5 (see Appendix) in fact places Deerness squarely among the Norse monasteries. The site probably is complex; there may well have been Early Christian occupation preceding the Norse, and the massive 'vallum monasterii' with its impressive gateway (the last not shown on the Commission's plan) is most likely a relic of an Iron Age fort. The circular depressions on the south-east side (except for the large one, which surrounds a well or sump), look suspiciously like shell-holes - the Brough was used for target practice by the Navy during the first war. Thus although Early Christian occupation is likely, there is nothing at present visible which is not better explained as either Iron Age, later mediaeval, or modern.

Appendix

The diagram (Fig. 5) compares the ranges of sizes of buildings on those sites for which reasonably accurate measurements are available. Each building is represented by a dot, the dots being disposed in columns according to the floor areas of the buildings they represent. Cross-wall and other buildings with two or more rooms are treated as one building when it is clear that this is how they were regarded by their builders and inhabitants. Buildings such as Kame of Isbister 11 and 12, and the Aodann Mhor ones (where the floors are on different terrace-levels) evidently were not so regarded, even though they are, to a small extent, contiguous. Where sources give only the measurements of largest and smallest buildings on a site, the range of sizes is indicated by a line. No. 14 at Kame of Isbister has been left out of the calculations because its plan is incomplete. When sources give overall (i.e. including wall thickness) measurements, without stating the wall thickness, this has been assumed as 3 ft when calculating floor area. Any error in this should not displace any dot more than one column to left or right, and such minor adjustments would not affect the overall impression given by the table. It must of course be allowed that measurements taken from small-scale plans cannot be completely accurate.

Even allowing for such inaccuracies, the table would still bring out the essential distinction between the Celtic and the Norse monasteries. The earlier ones are based on the repetition of a uniformly small building unit.

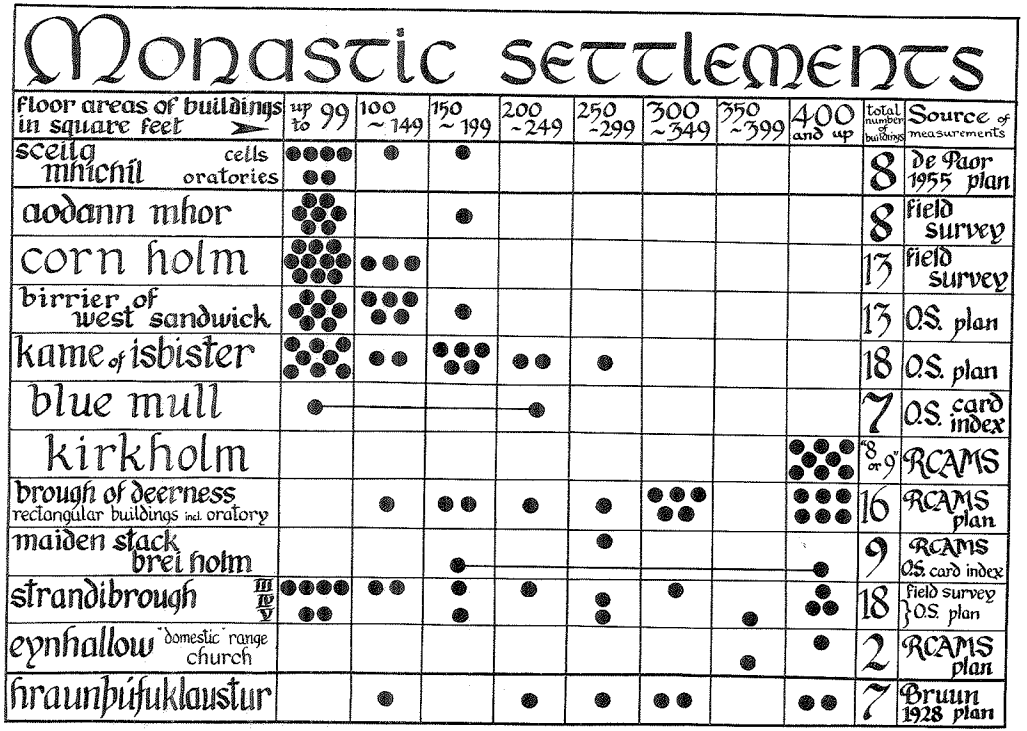
Monastic settlements
floor areas of buildings in square feet
up to 99
100 ~ 149
150 ~ 199
200 ~ 249
250 ~ 299
300 ~ 349
350 ~ 399
400 and up
total number of buildings
Source of measurements
sceilg mhichíl cells oratories
8
de Paor 1955 plan
aodann mhor
8
field survey
corn holm
13
field survey
birrier of west sandwick
13
O.S. plan
kame of isbister
18
O.S. plan
blue mull
7
O.S. card index
kirkholm
"8 or 9"
RCAMS
brough of deerness
rectangular buildings incl. oratory
16
RCAMS plan
maiden stack
brei holm
9
RCAMS O.S. card index
strandibrough
III
IV
V
18
field survey } O.S. plan
eynhallow
"domestic" range
church
2
RCAMS plan
hraunbúfuklaustur
7
Bruun 1928 plan

Figure 5.

The Norse ones have a wider range of building sizes and an emphasis at the larger end of the scale, suggesting a variety of specialised buildings (which at Strandibrough at least would include farm buildings), and emphasizing the settlement itself as the basic unit.

Kirkholm (RCAMS, 1946, iii, 111, no. 1460) is curious. Although the buildings are very much larger than on the pre-Norse sites, it lacks the range of smaller buildings which the other Norse sites possess. The Royal Commission is vague as to the actual number of buildings, and it is possible that their survey overlooked other structures. (It should be noted that the name Kirkholm would hardly have come down, had not the site had some religious association in the Norse or later mediaeval period.)

Notes

1. The sites of Kame of Isbister, Birrier of West Sandwick, and Outer Brough of Strandibrough, were noticed on air-photographs by Miss E M Scott of the Archaeology Division of the Ordnance Survey in Edinburgh, during the recent resurvey of the area. The matter was taken up by Mr A Clarke (Superintendent, Archaeology Division) and Mr J Fox (Assistant Archaeology Officer) who during 1970 visited the sites by helicopter (DES 1970, 56-7). I am very grateful to the Ordnance Survey and Mr Clarke for allowing me to reproduce their excellent plans, for making available their descriptions of the remains, and for the use of the Card Index which is a mine of information.
2. Told to writer at Isbister farm, North Roe, August 1971.
3. Mr Coutts, Everland. June 1970.
4. RCAMS, 1946, iii, 156, no. 1704. Details of Brei Holm from Ordnance Survey card index.
5. Comparison with Hvalsey further suggests that the single-splay, lintel-headed windows of the Eynhallow nave may be original features of the church, and not modifications of the domestic period. The best pictures of Hvalsey are in Krogh, 1967, 98-9.

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