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A DANE IN SHETLAND

Aage Roussell and his journey to the Scottish Isles in 1931

by Steffen Stummann Hansen, University of Copenhagen

PART TWO

WHAT were the results of Roussell's journey, and what role did it come to play in future research on the North Atlantic? Bearing in mind the sceptical words of the archaeologists in Edinburgh about his project, Roussell might not have looked too eagerly for preserved structural remains from the Scandinavian period. At least he found none. He seems to have been much more interested in looking for surviving remnants of the Scandinavian past in more recent architecture.

In the Hebrides, Rousell had become very excited about the "black houses", which had the dwelling and byre under the same roof. He saw them as a clear remnant of the Scandinavian longhouse of the Iron Age. Regarding the Northern Isles he wrote: *"In the Northern Isles this house type has been further developed, so that the Orcadian farm is a very complex structure, but the line of development clearly passes through the somewhat simpler Shetland farm back to the basic form in the Hebrides."*

In his conclusion to his report to the Carlsberg Foundation Roussell sounds a bit disappointed: *"I had expected to find instructive points of resemblance between the house types in the Scottish Isles and those that we know from Iceland and Greenland. At certain points, the dissimilarities were so big, however, that we must conclude that it is not the same type."* This conclusion may have been reasonable at the time, but today, with much more archaeological work behind us, it can be challenged.

Nørland had hoped that Roussell would substantiate his so-called "British Isles-connection" interpretation of the relationship between churches in Greenland and the Scottish Isles with observations on the architecture of the rural settlements in the Scottish Isles. However, Roussell saw the Hebridean "black house" as a purely Scandinavian phenomena, and it seems that he thereby put an end to Nørland's aspirations about the "British Isles connection". Roussell's view has been strongly contested since. Some researchers have suggested that the 'black house' actually represents a Celtic (Irish) tradition. If that is the case, architectural details in Norse buildings further up the North Atlantic may substantiate Nørlund's idea of a "British Isles connection".

In a pure Shetland context, however, Nørland's work was of pioneering importance. He was the first to categorise the farms and their configurations and to study the geographical distribution of different configurations inside Shetland. Unfortunately no one has really developed the perspectives put forward by Roussell. I hope that work presently being conducted on Norse sites in Unst will eventually provide some of the answers.

After his journey Roussell became director of four archaeological expeditions to Greenland in 1932, 1934, 1935 and 1937. The results from most of these expeditions, and the one from 1930, were presented in his publication *Sandnes and the Neighbouring Farms* from 1936. Roussell gave a general survey of the then state of research into the Norse settlement in Greenland in *Farms and Churches in the Mediaeval Norse*

The croft of Effirth recorded by Roussell iln 1931. *Photo: Danish National Museum (Aage Roussell)*

Settlements of Greenland (1941), a publication which finally gave him the doctor of philosophy degree. Also, in 1939 Roussell became the representative of the Danish National Museum in the joint Scandinavian investigations of the Norse settlements in Pjórsárdalur in Iceland. The expedition to Iceland was characterised by Roussell as *"a small Scandinavian congress of archaeologists, who were digging instead of eating dinners"*. In the final publication from this project (1943) he not only presented his own investigations but also produced a chapter on comparative issues.

On his way to the excavations in Iceland in the summer of 1939 Roussell actually returned to Orkney and Shetland. He was invited by the Ministry of Works, and seems to have visited excavations on Brough of Birsay in Orkney and, of course, Jarlshof in Shetland. In Orkney he stayed with his good friend J. Storer Clouston.

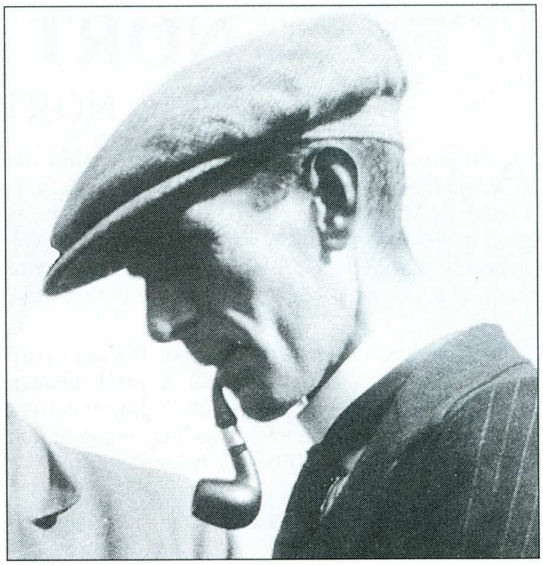
Roussell was permanently employed at the Danish National Museum in 1937, as assistant keeper at the medieval department. He became a director of that department in 1949. During the German occupation of Denmark 1940-1945 he was active in the resistance movement; it was therefore quite natural, when the Danish Resistance Museum was founded in 1957, that he became its first director. He retired in 1971 but was at that time already very ill, and died the following year.

His new positions after the war of course gave him a lot of other, not least administrative, duties. Nevertheless he maintained an interest in the architecture of the Norsemen. In the archives of the Danish National Museum I recently found a manuscript written by Roussell. It turned out to be a fine review of John Hamilton's publication of the excavations at Jarlshof (1956). Unfortunately this, Roussell's last contribution to Norse archaeology, was never published.

Postscript

In part one of this article it was said that Roussell no doubt had local informants to direct his research in Shetland, but that we didn't know who they were. Before finishing my manuscript I discussed this with my good colleague Brian Smith of the Shetland Archives. In his opinion the only Shetlanders who could really have helped Roussell during his visit would have been William W. Ratter (1873-1947) and John Nicolson (1876-1951). They were the only Shetlanders alive at the time of Roussell's visit who had a good knowledge of things Scandinavian. Both could read and speak Scandinavian languages and were interested in antiquities. However, there seemed to be no chance of having this confirmed.

Nevertheless, shortly after part one was published



John Nicolson, who in August 1931 guided Aage Roussell during his stay in Shetland. John Nicolson and William Ratter were both employed at the Public Assistance Office in Lerwick. It must have been the only PA Office in Britain with two antiquarians with Scandinavian interests in charge!

Photo: Shetland Museum

I received a copy of a report which Roussell had sent to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Edinburgh, in May 1932. In it Roussell wrote: *"In Lerwick I was referred to Mr W. Ratter, who unfortunately was not at home, but his assistant, Mr J. Nicolson, appeared to be an excellent and genial guide, who had a thorough knowledge of my affairs."*

Roussell also said in the report: *"Likewise it was a great pleasure for me to make the acquaintance of the gentlemen Mr Curle, Calder and Corrie, who showed me their greatest help and kindness."* Alexander O. Curle was involved in the excavations at Jarlshof that year while Charles S. T. Calder and John Corrie both worked on the Royal Commission's Inventory for Shetland.

In 1950 the first Viking Congress took place in Lerwick. Of the colleagues Roussell had met and worked with during his visit to Orkney and Shetland in 1931, Marwick, Nicolson, Curle and Calder were present. Ratter, Storer, Clouston and Corrie had all died in the meantime. One can wonder why Roussell was not among the delegates of that congress.

Acknowledgements

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