

# □ THE NEW □ SHETLANDER



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# A Norse farmstead at Sandwick, Unst

by Steffen Stummann Hansen, University of Copenhagen

MANY visitors to the beautiful sandy beach at Sandwick in Unst have noticed the amazingly well-preserved Norse building situated just as one approaches the beach from the south. This important archaeological site was excavated between 1978-1980 by the American archaeologist Gerald F. Bigelow, who subsequently published several exciting papers on the site and its Shetland historical context. The site was dated by the excavator to the 12th-14th centuries — rather late in the Norse period in Shetland.

Unknown to most visitors to the beach, there is another and less well-preserved Norse site, situated near the northern end of the beach and therefore referred to as *Sandwick-North*. This site was identified by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Scotland in the 1940s and it was first confirmed as being Viking or Norse in 1980, when Bigelow, together with two colleagues, conducted a small trial excavation at the already heavily-eroded site.

During a survey by the present author in the autumn of 1994 it became evident that the site, being situated within the present springtide zone, was apparently now eroding rapidly and the remains would probably soon be completely lost to the sea. Salvage recording and excavation were therefore desirable in order to try and attempt to date the site and record it as fully as possible. An excavation project was set up by Val Turner and carried out by the author for Shetland Amenity Trust. Financial support for a rescue excavation was then provided by Historic Scotland and Shetland Amenity Trust.

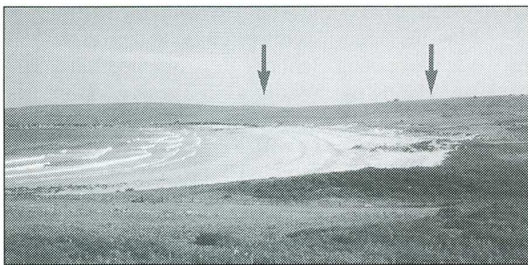
In total, an area of approximately 450m<sup>2</sup> was excavated on the site. Due to the erosion in most cases

so little was preserved of the individual buildings that hardly anything can be deduced about the lay-out and the size of the buildings, let alone their function. In the northern part, however, a well-paved, stone-built entrance and path were preserved. This entrance and path led into the best-preserved structure, which obviously had been part of an originally more extensive complex on the site. The structure consisted of two rather small rooms orientated in approximately north-south direction and separated by a stone-built wall. The entrance to both rooms was from the above-mentioned entrance or path, which seems to have passed right through the complex with the two rooms. The two rooms seem to have been separated from one another by a stone-built wall. The function of these rooms has not been established yet and will have to await further examination of finds, samples, etc. They do not, however, seem to have been dwelling-rooms, as no fire-place was found in either of the rooms.

Although the buildings on the site were only fragmentarily preserved, a huge number of finds were uncovered during the excavation. The assemblage of artefacts was dominated by items of various types of stone-materials, especially steatite and schist. They included large numbers of sherds from vessels (cooking pots, saucepans, cups, etc), line and net sinkers, gaming-boards, spindle whorls, baking plates, and whetstones. Other objects worthy of mention include bone combs, bone pins and a beautifully preserved bronze pin of so-called Hiberno-Norse type.

All of these objects are typical of the Viking and medieval Scandinavian emigrant culture in the North Sea and North Atlantic region. Most of them have their origin in Scandinavian culture, but it is difficult at the present time to say whether they were produced there and subsequently exported to the colonies or if they were produced locally. While whetstones of schist, baking plates of steatite and bone combs may have been imported from Scandinavia, vessels and other objects of steatite would have been produced locally. Several steatite quarries are known in Shetland, for example that excavated at Clibberswick in Unst (*Clibber = Scandinavian and Shetland: kleber = soapstone or steatite*).

How old then is this settlement at Sandwick-North? Often the lay-out and construction of buildings provide a good indication of their date. Curved walls in long houses are thus a feature of the



View over the sites during excavation. Note the indication of respectively *Sandwick* (far end of the beach) and *Sandwick-North*.

Photo: Steffen Stummann Hansen/Shetland Amenity Trust

Viking period (c. 800-1050), while straight walls seem to be a feature that gradually becomes typical in the following Late Norse or medieval period.

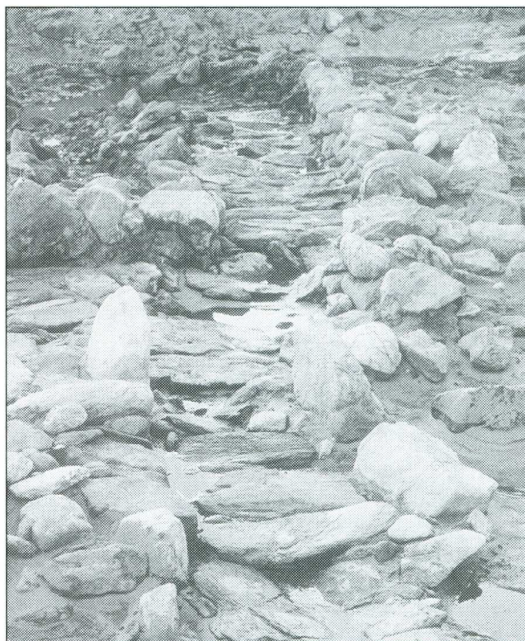
The remains of the buildings preserved at Sandwick-North give immediate overall impression of being from the Late Norse period but as the structures were very fragmentarily preserved, they cannot provide us with a more exact date within that period. We therefore have to turn to the objects found during the excavation to see whether they can help us to establish a close date for the site.

The artefact assemblage is rather homogeneous. The steatite sherds from the site represent vessel-types (mostly circular and oval), which are typical for the Viking as well as the Late Norse period. Baking plates, however, are not represented in Viking contexts in Norway or the Norse colonies in the North Atlantic and must be regarded as an artefact type from the Late Norse period. In Norway the manufacture of baking plates seems to start about 1050 AD. The combs from Sandwick-North also indicate a Late Norse date (12th-13th century).

Finally, mention should be made of the bronze pins of Hiberno-Norse (Irish Scandinavian) type. This type of pins, which is characteristic for the Scandinavian colonies in Ireland and Scotland and uncommon in the emigrants' Scandinavian homelands, is represented in stratified layers in the Scandinavian settlement in Dublin but the assemblage here has not yet been fully analysed. The pin is, however, definitely of Late Norse date and a 12th century date is suggested. An almost identical parallel to the pin from Sandwick-North was found years ago while excavating a Late Norse building at the Brough of Birsay in Orkney.

An appropriate date for the settlement at Sandwick-North consequently must be 11th-13th century. The people who lived on the site may have been the predecessors of the people who lived at the site excavated by Bigelow at the southern end of the beach. This question cannot, however, be satisfactorily answered until a more detailed study of the recordings and the finds has been completed.

These thoughts about the excavation at Sandwick-North must necessarily be of a preliminary nature, as we only finished the excavation a few months ago. Ahead of us lies the post-excavation work, which includes sorting out the relationship between the different recorded structures, examination of objects and samples, determination as to species of the thousands of animal bones (especially fish, it seems) etc. Not until this work has been completed shall we, eventually, be able to give a more detailed picture of the activities and the daily



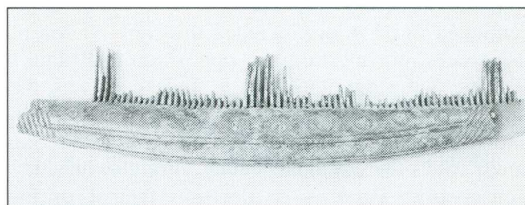
**The path running through the structure in the southern part of the site. View from the east.**

*Photo: Steffen Stummann Hansen/Shetland Amenity Trust*

life of the Shetlanders, who lived here about 800 years ago.

Although the excavation at Sandwick-North was a rescue excavation it should not, however, be seen as an isolated archaeological activity in Unst. The excavation is to be regarded as part of a much more ambitious project initiated by the author and Shetland Amenity Trust dealing with the Scandinavian settlement in Unst.

A survey of the island has already been conducted and more than thirty sites have been recorded with remains of Scandinavian buildings. It is hoped that large-scale excavations on some of these sites in the near future will provide fresh and unique archaeological material from an important part of Shetland's past.



**Ornated bone comb with copper rivets (12th century) from the Sandwick-North site.**

*Photo: Shetland Museum*