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***Beside the Ocean: Coastal Landscapes at the Bay of Skail, Marwick and Birsay Bay, Orkney: Archaeological Research 2003-2018.* By David Griffiths, Jane Harrison and Michael Athanson, Oxford, Oxbow. Books, 2019. Hardback. xxviii,346 pp ISBN 9781789250961 £45.00 (Digital Edition ISBN 9781789250978)**

In 2003, a small group of researchers began work on a landscape survey in northwest Mainland, Orkney. This project and research team gradually expanded and developed to cover an area some 10 x 2km, with investigations focusing on key areas from Birsay Bay, in the north, south to Marwick, and Skail. Over a fifteen-year period, exceptionally extensive geophysical survey was supplemented by a series of excavations, most notably at the Bay of Skail, where excavations at the East Mound site revealed a regularly modified Norse farmstead occupied for approximately a hundred years from c.AD1000 onwards. [126/127]

This publication explores the results of this extensive work, while also taking care to reference older excavations and discoveries in this archaeologically rich area, from the antiquarian finds at Skail to the long tradition of excavation at Birsay. By doing this, it helps to refine and clarify the landscape context of these older excavations. Inevitably, the present report is dominated by the evidence produced by excavation, and in particular that produced by two sites on the northern side of the Bay of Skail – the Castle of Snusgar (almost certainly the site of the 1858 hoard), and the aforementioned East Mound, which became the focus both of excavation and this publication.

It is clear that conditions at the East Mound were testing, with sandy soil, rabbits, and the original inhabitants' habit of using older material when rebuilding adding to the difficulties of interpreting the complex stratigraphic/architectural development of this site over a relatively short period. Given this, the clarity and precision of both the excavation and the publication are very impressive. 'Viking' activity at the site began with a hall-house, which was modified to become a longhouse with byre and ancillary buildings, and was ultimately abandoned following a final phase in which the probably roofless structure was used as an animal pen. A range of scientific techniques indicate that food preparation in the later phases of the longhouse was focused at its western end, while it is clear that only one side of the 'byre' area was used for animals, the other side being a work area. Outside the structure, a smithing area was identified immediately west of the ancillary building. Given the rarity of such finds, this evidence will be of particular interest to specialists in this area.

The artefacts from this site are comprehensively described and discussed in a series of specialist reports, but it is clear that the assemblage is not particularly extensive or impressive, dominated by iron artefacts, but with some copper-alloy, bone and antler, stone (including steatite), glass, and (more surprisingly) some ceramics. These finds support the excavators' interpretation of the site as one of relatively low status, which may have lost influence as the eleventh century progressed. Potential links to the Irish Sea area, and particularly Ireland, are striking, as is a lack of material of definite Scandinavian origin. This raises some interesting questions about eleventh century Orkney – or at least this site.

However, the single most impressive aspect of this excavation, and this report, must be the range and quality of specialist scientific techniques that have been applied to the extensive samples recovered from the site. This begins with the radiocarbon dates: Bayesian modelling has resulted in very tight dates, which inform the clear phasing system used throughout the text. As would be expected, archaeobotanical and archaeozoological analysis of soil samples and bones, including fish, provide clear evidence for agricultural activity, with barley and oats clearly predominating, and with

evidence for dairying and sheep farming. Detailed analysis provides further evidence of agricultural practices, such as the hanging of flax over an internal fire to dry, and the potential focus of food production activities already noted. Less familiar techniques, notably geochemical intra-site mapping of both organic and inorganic material, were clearly novel when employed, and have clear implications for future research, even if some of the results for this site are a little inconclusive, or serve to confirm interpretations already establishing using more conventional evidence. **[127/128]**

The volume concludes with a short but focused synthesis and discussion that seeks to summarise results and place them in the broader context of research on Viking settlement activity in Orkney, and occasionally further afield. Throughout, it is clear that the authors, and the twenty-five specialist contributors to this volume, are drawing on cutting-edge research, and the discussion sections that end many of these focused contributions form incredibly useful reference points for current research on these aspects of Viking and Late Norse life in Orkney.

For those already familiar with the important excavations in this part of Orkney, such as the Brough of Birsay and Buckquoy, the relevant sections of this volume provide new insights to their broader landscape context, while the extensive geophysical work at Skail now encompasses almost all of the area around the Bay. The new evidence from Snusgar is intriguing, but, inevitably, most readers will be drawn to the East Mound, its complex development within a relatively short period, and its final abandonment. As the volume makes clear, the settlement history of Orkney is dynamic and influenced by both environmental and socio-political developments. The settlements established in the early Viking Age in Orkney were not necessarily those used in the Late Norse period, nor was the settlement hierarchy necessarily as stable as some earlier commentators have suggested. This publication represents an important contribution to our understanding of Viking settlement in Orkney, and to the use of space within longhouses and around small farmsteads, including the farming and fishing activity on which these sites depended. As such, it joins a growing number of modern excavations and reports on relatively modest Viking and Late Norse farmsteads in northern Scotland that are transforming our understanding of daily life and economics in this important period.

Stephen Harrison