THE SHETLAND CHAPEL-SITES PROJECT 1999–2000

Christopher D. Morris
with Kevin J. Brady and Paul G. Johnson

Introduction

It is a matter of record that Barbara Crawford has, throughout her academic career, taken a keen interest in the Viking and Late Norse periods in Shetland. A glance at the Bibliography in her ground-breaking *Scandinavian Scotland* volume, published in 1987 (and reprinted since), under her own name confirms that amply (Crawford 1987, 254). This interest has been most evidently demonstrated by inter-disciplinary work on the island of Papa Stour and her major project at ‘Da Biggins’ (Crawford & Ballin Smith 1999). Even in the 1987 general volume, however, Barbara demonstrated her thorough grasp of the issues surrounding ‘Conversion and the Organization of Christianity’ in Chapter 6. Here, her masterly summary brought together diverse material and pointed the way forward for other scholars, while taking due account of the pioneering work of individuals such as her St Andrews colleague, Ronald Cant (for instance Cant 1975; 1984). An indication of the direction of her future interests is given by the volume she edited in 1998, following the Fourth St Andrews Day Conference (Crawford (Ed.) 1998), and the Fifth Conference in 2001 then brought things full-circle back to Papa Stour, and the subject of the elusive ‘Papar’ (Crawford (Ed.) 2002).

The Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research Project (VESARP) began work in 1997 on Chapel-sites in Shetland essentially following up the sorts of issues signaled by Barbara in 1987, and also issues raised by some of my own work in Orkney (see Morris 1996; 2003; 2004). This early work is described in other papers (for example, Morris & Brady with Johnson 1999, Morris 2001). The following paper outlines the more recent results of desk-based assessment, walk-over ‘audit’ survey, and more detailed topographic and geophysical surveys carried out by VESARP on the pre-Reformation Chapel-sites of Unst, Fetlar and Yell. Work in Shetland by VESARP on sites outside these three islands will not be described here, but is of some significance and
of undoubted interest to Barbara, requiring a more extended discussion than can be afforded here. However, they have both recently achieved an interim publication stage (Barrowman 2003; Brady 2002).

Regrettably, due to my own managerial position as Vice-Principal at Glasgow University since 2000, it has not been possible so far for me to follow up the suggestions for further work made in the reports referred to below. Indeed, this paper is based upon one delivered to the Faroese Viking Congress in July 2001, but unable to be brought to fruition in time for the deadline for its publication. I sure that Barbara will appreciate that in offering this small account of further work carried out in an area of particular interest to herself, I am also discharging an academic debt to my colleagues (including her) in bringing to print a summary account of important material currently only available in the ‘grey literature’ with which Archaeology in Scotland and Britain more generally abounds.

However, I am sure that Barbara is as impatient as I for further progress to be made, and will welcome the fact that, just as she has retired from full-time academe to pursue her own particular interests, so I shall be returning to my own particular academic interests, as I step down from this position in 2006. Watch this (or another!) space…!

The Unst Chapel-Sites Survey

The earlier work in 1997 and 1998 has been outlined elsewhere and will not be repeated here (Morris & Brady with Johnson 1999; Morris 2001). A third field campaign on the chapel-sites of Unst took place in late summer 1999. This was a continuation of the Phase I non-intrusive survey at these sites, focussing upon geophysical survey directed by Paul Johnson and further topographic survey, co-ordinated by Kevin Brady (Brady & Johnson 2000). Also, in 1999, two sites that had been unable to be examined in the previous two years were finally visited as part of the ‘audit’ survey (Kirkamool and Uyea). The walkover survey of the sites at Kirkamool and Uyea had varying degrees of success. There is little to add to the place-name evidence of the former: three sites were examined but none are particularly convincing as a potential chapel-site. Uyea, on the other hand, is a very important site, and has considerable potential. The standing remains are of considerable interest, although it should be noted that it is not a conventional ‘nave-and-chancel’ building as there has been confusion in the past over the so-called