PART THREE

ARCHAEOLOGY, MATERIAL CULTURE AND SETTLEMENT
NORWICK: SHETLAND’S FIRST VIKING SETTLEMENT?

Beverley Ballin Smith

Introduction

In 2003 archaeological remains came to light during the excavation of an extension to the existing graveyard at Norwick, Unst in Shetland. Analysis of the structural elements, samples and artefacts revealed that some of the settlement was early Viking in date. The picture is complicated: firstly, because the Viking structures developed over a settlement of Iron Age date; and secondly, a medieval chapel and churchyard was later constructed on top of the Viking buildings. This stratigraphic complexity was not fully revealed or excavated due to the constraints of the extent of the graveyard, and the available time. The results of the excavation will be published in 2007 (Ballin Smith forthcoming a), but this paper presents the preliminary conclusions and the significance of the site and its artefactual assemblage for Viking colonisation of the Shetland and the west.

The early history of the settlement of the site

Norwick lies on the east coast, but towards the north-east corner of Unst, the most northerly of the Shetland Islands (Illus. 35 see also location on Illus. 47). The area of Norwick is dominated by the wide sandy bay of Nor Wick, and is sheltered from all but the easterly winds by a prominent headland to the north, the Ward of Norwick and Housi Field to the west, and the Hill of Clibberswick to the south. In approaching the island from the sea, a mere two days sail from Norway, Nor Wick bay would have offered one of the best landing places in the island, with that of Sand Wick bay to the south. A freshwater stream, the Burn of Norwick, courses through a shallow valley known as Norwick Meadow leading to the open sea. A thousand years or more ago this low-lying area was probably underwater and formed part of Nor Wick bay as the landscape features on either side of the valley are now inland cliffs. Repeated accumulation of windblown sand and natural silting