

**A PROGRESS REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT 'DA BIGGINS',
PAPA STOUR, SHETLAND, 1978.**

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In the summer of 1978 a second season's excavation was carried out at the Biggins, Papa Stour, in the search for the homestead of Duke Hakon of Norway, referred to in the earliest Shetland document of 1299 (see report of first season's work in *Northern Studies*, 11). The first aim was to confirm that we were excavating a mediaeval Norse site, which was not entirely certain from the previous season's work. This was achieved and some interesting results have been obtained.

Further structures uncovered in Trench J show that the Norse house lies at right angles to, and partly under, the abandoned croft house called 'Da Gør!'. The derivation suggested for this house name in my previous report now seems unlikely, and Norwegian experts are inclined to think that it is derived from O.N. 'gård-holl'; 'Farm-hill/mound' (with the stress being on the hill of *the* farm, suggesting that it was remembered as the site of a previous farm or house. In 1861 there were thirty-six households at the Biggins).

The wall running across the S-W corner of Trench J is probably the long wall of a Norse house of twelfth or thirteenth century date. From its construction and size the house would appear to have been one of substance, for the wall is 1.5 metres wide and made of large regularly-laid stones with a projecting foundation course. The central core is filled with turf, as is usual in stone-built houses of the Viking period. This wall's relationship with the other walls found on the site is, as yet, a matter of conjecture. When studying the lay-out of Norse farms, it is the Greenland excavations which provide the most useful comparative material. Here there are undisturbed plans of farms from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. The house of the bishops of Greenland at Gardar in particular provides the most perfect record of the layout of a residence of a person of status from the period. It comprises several building periods, and is a mixture of a long-house (the oldest part) and a passage-house, built out at the back later. Off this passage was built, in the thirteenth century,

DA BIGGINS

PAPA STOUR

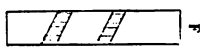
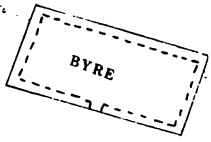
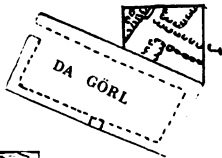
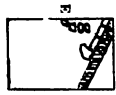
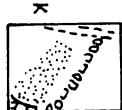
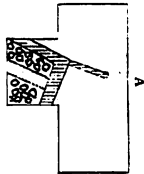


--- mediaeval walls

▣ paving

▣ flooring

▣ later walls



road

a festal hall of great size (16.75 m. x 7.8 m), called the *stofa*, the main room of the residence. It was in the *stofa* of Duke Hakon's farm on Papa Stour that the quarrel occurred between his bailiff, Thorvald Thoreson, and a tenant, Ragnhild Simunsdatter, in 1299. The bishop of Greenland's *stofa* was built with great care, of large regular stones, and with a projecting foundation course. The walls were 1.5 m. thick — exactly the same dimensions as the wall uncovered in Trench J at the Biggings. We cannot of course yet say that this is the *stofa*, but it is certainly the wall of a building of importance. Whether that building will turn out to be constructed on the long-house plan, as all Norse houses excavated in the Northern Isles so far, or whether it incorporated any of the passage-house principles, it will be interesting to find out next year.

Certainly the cooking area does not appear to be in alignment with the above-mentioned wall. This has been found in Trench H some ten metres or so to the N-W, comprising a large hearth area covered with peat ash 30 cm. thick. It consisted of several large smooth slabs of stone cracked by heat, and without any stone kerb as in the *langeldr* type of fire. It is thought by Norwegian archaeologists that such hearth stones were used as baking slabs for baking unleavened bread or barley bread. This would certainly appear to have been the most likely use at our site from finds such as a broken quern-stone and pieces of steatite baking griddle found close by. The latter were scored on one side for the easier conduction of heat during cooking. The depth of the peat ash indicates that the area had been in use for cooking for a very long time. Three of the hearth stones extended over 2 m. in length which gives some indication of the size of the establishment being catered for. I do not think that such baking slabs have been recorded from sites in the Northern Isles before — or they may have gone unrecognised. They have been found in the earliest Greenland farms but not in the later ones. This is thought to be an indication of the increasing rarity of cereals being used by the Greenland Vikings, and the corresponding decline in bread baking. The discovery of such slabs in Papa Stour corresponds with the known fertility of the soil in the island, and particularly at the Biggings. In historical times it is recorded that the islanders produced grain surplus to their needs, and in times of famine on the mainland of Shetland, were able to export oatmeal and beremeal.

Close to these baking slabs we discovered another feature consistent with this being a cooking area: the remains of small pits filled with carbonised material (which included seaweed). These were possibly cooking pits, in which food was cooked by means of hot stones which had been heated in the fire and placed in the pits along with green vegetable material (in this instance perhaps seaweed) and the whole then sealed with peat and turf while the food steam-cooked. Such cooking pits are well documented from Norse sites in Greenland and Iceland — as well as Newfoundland. They do not appear to have been so customary in Norway itself where perhaps the abundance of wood made different cooking methods more prevalent. The only one previously recorded in the Northern Isles was in a twelfth/thirteenth century house at Jarlshof.

These are the recognisable remains of a dwelling-house of the Norse period, although the plan of the structure has not yet been ascertained. Can a closer date be put upon the site from the finds? The most characteristic feature of any Norse site is the use of soapstone or steatite for artefacts of every kind. This was a most convenient material, easy to carve and fire-proof, thus obviating the need for any ceramic ware. Shetland of course provided the raw material and we found a large unworked piece of soapstone which appears to show that blocks of it were imported into the island and worked on the site. Every kind of domestic utensil could be made and we found the remains of square-sided pots, loom-weights, spindle whorls and moulds for brooches. So useful was this material that pieces of broken pot were re-used as loom-weights. The little Shetland lamps, or collies, were often made of soapstone too, although the only example we have found so far has proved to be made out of sandstone, which is rather remarkable considering that it has a delicate curved handle.

One of the most mysterious features of Norse archaeology is the use or non-use of pottery. It was established by the excavations at Jarlshof that the farmers there started to use ceramics during the course of the settlement, perhaps early in the twelfth century. What the reason was for this increasing use of pottery is not at all clear, for the ware is extremely coarse and was probably rather brittle. We have already found a remarkable quantity of this early ware (about 150 sherds compared with 324 in the whole Jarlshof site). So it is

reasonably clear that we are at the moment excavating twelfth and thirteenth century levels.

From this we are able to say that the fragments of textile from Trench K are the oldest known pieces of cloth found in Shetland. As mentioned in my previous report the site is covered in a thick layer of peat and turf which is possibly the remains of collapsed roofing and walls. This has proved to be a good medium for preserving textile and wood (although not unfortunately bone). A report on the textiles from Mrs. Bennett of the National Museum shows that we have the foot of a woven stocking and some patched pieces of what may at one time have been a rather fine garment from the quality of the weave and the number of the seams. The weave of the textiles fits into a Norse context and is remarkably similar to the weave of the famous Herjolfsness garments excavated in Greenland, which included long stockings or hose. The foot of our stocking is made in exactly the same way, with the toe section separate from the heel and with the seam running under the foot. Hose was always made from woven cloth until the advent of knitting into Northern Europe in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries.

With a discarded sock and rags we are getting onto an intimate level with the material culture of the people who lived at the Biggings in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Who they were we do not yet know, but it is hoped that a third and final season's excavation will help us to establish the size and dimensions of the house and therefore perhaps the status of the owner of the homestead which today lies buried under the Gørl.