

Bu of Orphir



The Round Kirk and Earl's Bu

There was at Orphir a large drinking hall, and there was a door in the south side wall under the east gable, and a magnificent church stood facing the hall door; and one went down steps from the hall to the church. And when one entered the hall there was on the left a large flagstone, and between it and the hall were a number of large ale-casks; but opposite the outer door was a small room.

This is what *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us about the Earls of Orkney's great estate in Orphir. The description is detailed because it sets the scene for a brutal double murder which takes place during the rule of Hakon's son Paul in the 1130s. Paul hosts a great Yule feast with many important men in attendance, rivals Sweyn Asleifarson and Sweyn Breastrope are present and it doesn't take long for them to fall out over accusations of unfair drinking. The disagreement escalates and when it is clear that one of the Sweyn's will die, Sweyn Asleifson and his kinsmen makes sure he is the one that lives by plotting an elaborate plan whereby Sweyn Breastrope is injured and kills his kinsman John before dying himself. This takes place in the hall entrance on the way to mass. Although the saga doesn't name the estate centre, archaeological remains and place-name evidence tell us that it was most likely here at The Bu. However, there are some conflicting elements in the story that are difficult to account for, but are usually explained away as being the result of a lack of knowledge of the terrain. Though this is not a convincing explanation and it may be that the story conflates two of the Earl's halls in one event – the other being the aforementioned Skail which is better placed to fit the saga description of Sweyn's flight after the murder, when he leaves the scene on horseback and rides over the hill to Damsay and ultimately to the Bishop in Egilsay who arranges for him to be sent to Tíree, well out of the way of Earl Paul.

The place-name Bu indicates a large estate and rentals show that this was Old Earldom property and in the township of Orphir. Various excavations in the area have revealed remains of a range of sites dating to the Norse period, including a horizontal water mill, various unidentified buildings of different sizes, evidence for metal production, runic inscriptions and the remains of a Romanesque church.

The Round Kirk in Orphir, the remains of which can still be seen in the cemetery, is the only surviving round church in Scotland. Likely based on the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, it has been dated to the twelfth century and its foundation attributed to Earl Hakon with the explanation being given that he had the church built on his return from his penitential pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The church was dedicated to St Nicholas, a dedication found at several key Earldom churches, and the fact it is round implies a pilgrimage connection. Although we do not know for sure, the suggestion that Hakon founded the church is compelling and for this reason the Magnus Way includes the Round Kirk built, on one of Hakon's estates, in its route.

The church was partially excavated in the early twentieth century revealing the floor to be approximately a 1m below the present ground surface. Steps, a stone altar, two burials and a bone handle were found during the excavations. Later excavations at the nearby Norse Mill revealed a runic inscription which mentions the church.

The estate at Orphir would likely have had a church prior to the foundation of the Round Kirk and a tradition of a chapel and burial ground nearer the shore than the Round Church may hold a memory of it. A Pictish symbol stone fragment built into the Norse buildings also indicates the site was important before the Norse settled the islands. The Round Church, would have been a spectacular building showing to anyone that encountered it that the founder was a powerful pious Christian. This was the medieval parish church for Orphir and a late medieval elaborate gravestone (now lost) shows the continued importance of this church after saga times. A new church was built in 1707 making use of the fabric of the older church in its construction and subsequent repairs.

The 18th century church is now gone leaving the upstanding remains of the medieval Round Kirk. Previously known locally as the Girth House (ON *Grið* sanctuary/peace) it is tempting to see this name as a memory of the special nature of this church and its direct link, through its design, with the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and by association, if not by actual deed, with pilgrimage.