Freswick Links

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Freswick Links on Freswick Bay in Caithness has evidence of occupation from the Mesolithic through to medieval and modern times. Today several structures are visible, and the scars of World War II sand quarries. There was an Iron Age broch, several Norse structures, mausoleum, doocot and a castle. The area is subject to coastal erosion.

Fieldwalking and several items from the excavations of Curle and Childe in the 1930-40s as well as those from excavation of the broch by Tress Barry have found their way into the collections of the National Museums of Scotland. Other collections comprise casual finds, including metal detecting, making up collections in Inverness Museum, Dunbeath Heritage Centre as well as items retained by those who assisted in the earlier excavations and which are now held by Caithness Horizons, Thurso. The assemblages from the excavations on the Links in the 1980s by Durham University (Morris et al 1995) and beneath Freswick Castle/House in 1979 (Batey et al 1984) are held by the National Museums of Scotland. These include material spanning the Mesolithic and Neolithic eras (lithics), Bronze Age (Beaker pottery), Iron Age (essentially ceramics) and Late Norse period.

The excavations and survey undertaken by Christopher Morris and Colleen Batey with a team from Durham University in the 1980s focussed on Pictish and Norse settlement evidence, building on previous fieldwork by Tress Barry, Edwards, Curle and Childe. The excavated sites included middens, roundhouses, remains of an Iron Age broch and Norse houses, and a long cist burial (summarised in Morris et al 1995, 1ff). Colleen Batey has published many of the finds, including some in private ownership (Batey 1987).

The Durham University project undertook widespread environmental and zoological evidence, providing a wealth of data. However, the sheer amount of material, different excavation times and techniques, with only a limited number of radiocarbon dating in well defined sequences means that the detailed picture is still difficult to synthesise. It is however clear that there were extensive expanses of midden debris of the Pictish period and deep, complex fish-rich middens throughout the full length of the site for the Late Norse period. The crucial interface between Pictish and Viking presence was not identified at the site.

Dated core samples from Hill of Harley, 1.5 km away from Freswick Links, showed peat formation beginning in the Mesolithic period. Pastoral farming, and then arable first appeared around 5000 years ago, followed by bursts of farming through into the Bronze Age. During the Iron Age cereal cultivation became continuous, as well as evidence of pastoral farming. In contrast, the Hill of Harley evidence shows little evidence of cultivation in the Viking and Norse period. This has been interpreted to suggest inhabitants at Freswick Links at this time may have imported most if not all their cereals, which the evidence suggests was primarily barley and present in some quantities (Morris et al 1994, 15-16, 220ff).

Over 40 tonnes of samples were wet-sieved in the Durham fieldwork, the largest such environmental recovery programme to date in Scotland. The fish bone analysis is particularly valuable with few other Highland sites having such extensive data. This identified a wide variety of species, though in the main only a small number of species seem to have been targeted. The range of species was similar in the Pictish and Late Norse periods. Many of the fish appear to have been gutted before arriving at Freswick (Morris et al 1995, 154ff). The study also looked at animal bones, including birds, molluscs and shellfish. Different activities took place at different locations on the Links, but whether as a result of specialist working or a brief intensive activity was unclear (Morris et al 1995, 264).

The evidence from the Durham fieldwork did distinguish between Pictish and Late Norse midden deposits. The Pictish levels included cultivation evidence with a great deal of erosion, while the Late Norse was well stratified. The evidence for Viking activity is less clear cut but is likely to have been present elsewhere on the vast site. The evidence is clear for a late Norse presence, where fish was a major food source and perhaps also an export item, similar to the picture at Roberts Haven (MHG1734) just four miles to the north (Morris et al 1995, 268ff).

Freswick shows the potential and value of large environmental studies accompanying survey and excavation. This important multi-period site would repay further work, to create an accessible chronological framework of activity, integrating the many finds and extensive environmental evidence. More dates would be useful for an overall chronology, and further work to find and assess the prehistoric and Viking period activity.