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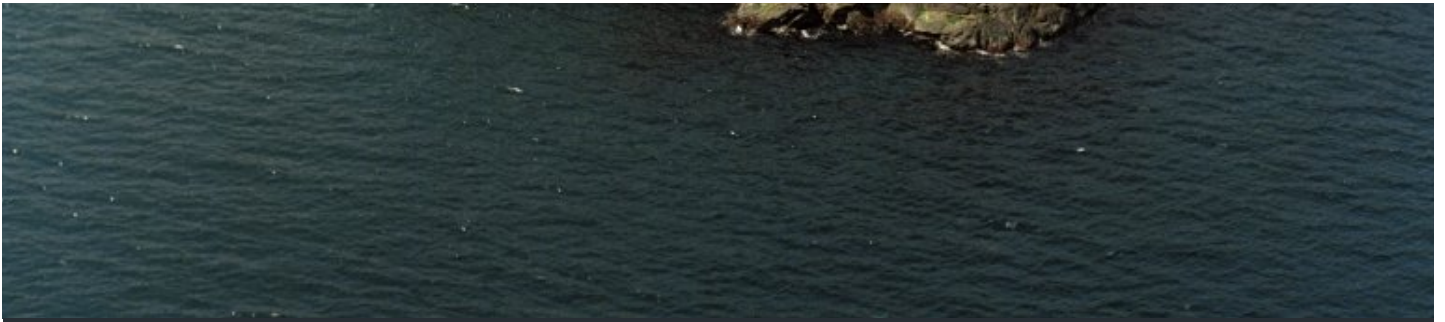


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Kame of Isbister Monastic settlement - North Roe, Shetland

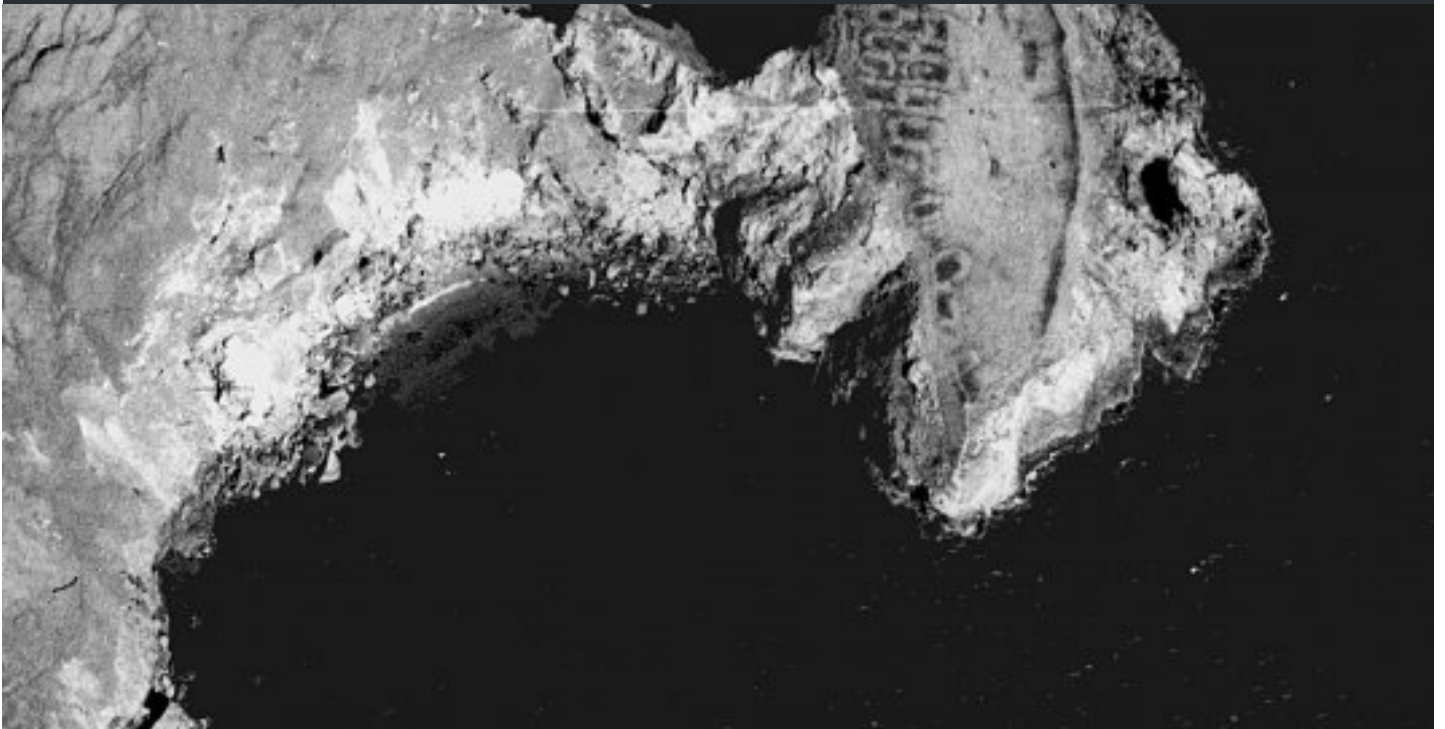




Visitors Beware!

The monastic settlement at Kame of Isbister consists of at least 19 small stone buildings perched on top of a precarious sea stack. An archaeological excavation in 2003 recovered material that was radiocarbon dated to c.860 AD, falling into a period in Shetland that can be described as Late Pictish or Norse.

Have you ever found yourself falling towards a rocky shore, with only a rope to stop you? That's what happened when I went to visit the Kame of Isbister. The site is on top of a sea-stack, connected to Shetland Mainland by a knife-edge ridge. Luckily I was with a rope team and even though they were looking away when I fell off the ridge, I was safe. Access to the stack could never have been easy, even at the time it was occupied. The ground of the stack is not flat, but slopes away from the mainland to Yell Sound, and there is a bank along its east side above the cliff below. Curiously, there is a very similar site at Birrier of West Sandwick, on the other side of the Sound.



Hiding from Vikings?

Today there are 19 stone buildings packed closely together. They range between 3m and 8m in length internally. Back in 1876, when the site was visited by George Cockburn, a student in divinity from Aberdeen, he reported seeing 23 little buildings and interpreted them as fishing station. Perhaps the ones closest to the cliff edge have crumbled into the sea by now. During the early 1970s the site was reinterpreted and mapped. It is so remote and hard of access that an interpretation as a fishing station seemed problematic and both the Ordnance Survey's Archaeology Division and Dr Raymond Lamb advanced the possibility that it was an early monastic settlement. Yet how did people get supplies there and where from? How could the economy have worked?

An archaeological team from Extreme Archaeology, a spin off from Time Team, undertook a small excavation in 2003 but did not recover any finds (Cockburn opened two small trenches in 1876 finding ashes, fire-marked stones and a 'nail or some instrument of iron'). But the most recent excavation did recover material for radiocarbon dating, and a date of c.860 AD seems to support the assessment made in the early 1970s. As Lamb noted in 1973, the buildings do not resemble Norse structures, so it may be that this is the site of a Pictish eremitic site. We can even imagine the possibility that this native site was set up, not only to get closer to God, but to avoid the Viking raiders of the time. The Vikings had many gods and perhaps didn't care about one more, but they had found out from Lindisfarne that Christian monks had treasure! Shetland didn't become officially Christian until 997 AD – and then only because the Norwegian king said that their alternative was decapitation – not the accepted way to make converts!

Dr Val Turner - Shetland Archaeologist



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/883/kame-of-isbister>

<http://pastmap.org.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/archaeologyshetlandamenitytrust/>



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