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St. Nicholas Church - Orphir, Orkney



A High Status Settlement

"There was a great drinking-hall at Orphir, with a door in the south wall near the eastern gable, and in front of the hall, just a few paces down from it, stood a fine church"

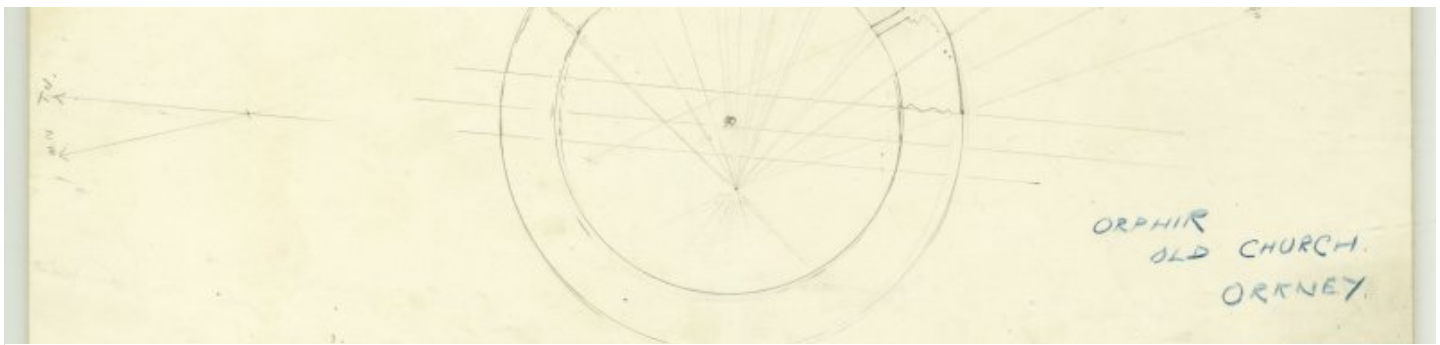
St. Nicholas Church is Scotland's only upstanding medieval round church. The church and associated high status settlement are mentioned in the Orkneyinga Saga. It was built on the direction of Earl Hakon Paulsson (d. 1122) in the early decades of the 12th century. He may have been inspired by what he saw on a pilgrimage he took to the Holy Land. The church is situated within the modern graveyard of Orphir, on the S coast of Mainland Orkney, close to the sea and overlooking the sheltered waters of Scapa Flow.

The church is part of what was once the preeminent settlement on Mainland Orkney. In the early 1100s it was the residence of Earl Hakon Paulsson, the man responsible for the killing of St. Magnus on Egilsay. The Orkneyinga Saga recounts that Hakon took a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in penance for his crime, and on his return the church was built. The church is one of several such round churches which were built in Europe around this time, and there are southern Scandinavian parallels. As such, although the ultimate inspiration for this building may have been the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the link between the two structures may not be as linear as the Orkneyinga Saga implies.

St. Nicolas Church is part of a larger lordly estate centre. This includes the adjacent buildings at Earl's Bu, the Earl's 'drinking hall'. Both St. Nicholas Church and Earl's Bu are properties in care, and maintained by Historic Environment Scotland on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Earl's Bu was excavated in the late 19th and early 20th century, and is poorly understood. A horizontal mill complex which forms part of the estate was investigated by Dr Colleen Batey in the early 1990s. She will shortly be publishing a book on the site which will place the settlement at Earl's Bu within the context of Norse Orkney and the rest of the Scandinavian World in the 1100s.

Nothing reliable is known of the archaeological remains on the church site. Geophysical survey failed to detect any remains which might be attributed to it.





'A Fine Church'

St. Nicholas was built on a small scale, and was likely intended for use by the Earl and his immediate family. It was circular in plan, with an eastern apse. The majority of the walls have been lost, but the line of the nave wall is marked by a gravel path on the ground. Enough survives to be able to say that this building was a substantial achievement for Orkney's masons, despite its small size.

The church was still described as complete in the late 1600s, and by the mid 1700s it was being used as a lime store for the new parish church which was being built to the south. About two thirds of the building was robbed for use in building the parish church. This has since been demolished, although its graveyard still surrounds the remains of the round kirk.

Dr Kirsty Owen - Archaeology and World Heritage Team



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/1962/orphir-st-nicholass-church>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/1968/earls-bu-orphir>
<http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/or-chrch.htm>





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