

Excavations at Swandro Rousay yield new discoveries

This years excavations at Swandro, on the Westness coastline of Rousay, proved to be extremely successful. The endangered multi-period site, much of which is under the storm beach, is being pounded by the winter storms and every tide is like a vacuum sucking out the finer midden and ash based deposits. This years excavation has provided a valuable insight into both the Iron Age settlement mound and the Neolithic Passage Grave and has reinforced the importance of this fragile site.

Two Iron Age buildings formed the focus of study this year, Structure 2, a building dating to the first half of the first millennium AD has a number of floors. The removal of a flagged floor this year by Bobby Friel (of Rousay) provided a glimpse of earlier levels and some *in situ* metalworking evidence. Signs of an earlier stone built tank pre-dating the floor proved of interest, Steve Dockrill (co-director of the project with Julie Bond) commented “this was an unusually large tank, big enough to hold Wendy, one of our American excavators, and it is hoped that samples from the infill might give us some insight into its last use.”

Below. The flagged floor in the middle Iron Age building Structure 2 before its lifting. The back of the building has been “stolen” by the sea demonstrating the risk that these buildings face from the destructive power of the storms.

Wendy demonstrating the size of the tank found under the floor.



Structure 3 is a Late Iron Age or Pictish building which proved to have a surviving hearth and ash floor as well as a doorway with intact door pivot, door jamb and bar keep, enabling the building to be locked from the inside. This floor proved to be very interesting as broken pieces of fired clay, slag and other indicators of metal working appeared to have been trodden into the ashy surface. The remains of a large elongated beach cobble was found partly covering the hearth. Steve said “this stone appeared to have been set upright and its upward end showed damage consistent with it having been repeatedly struck. If we are correct in thinking that this semi underground building was used as a smithy this is a likely candidate as having been used as an anvil.”

Below: The impressive ash floor and hearth in the “Pictish Smithy” and the anvil being displayed by Lindsey Kemp and Alan Braby.



The work on this building was assisted by the UK’s leading archaeological metallurgical expert Dr Gerry McDonnell. Gerry’s visit was part funded by the Rousay Heritage Trust’s HLF award. Besides being able to examine these important deposits Gerry visited some of Rousay’s past blacksmith’s workshops and held a public workshop at the Rousay Heritage centre.

The earliest and most interesting parts of the site are the investigations of the Neolithic Chambered Cairn. The eroding beach portion of the tomb has revealed both the passage and evidence for the collapse of its roof. Dr. Julie Bond (University of Bradford) explains “We are now down to the rubble infill, above this we had evidence for later infill dating probably to the first Viking settlers. They may well have found that the tomb was a good source of stone and they infilled the top of the passage with a number of butchered sheep, at least three cats and a coin of Eanred, a ninth century king of Northumbria.”

“What was totally unexpected was the discovery that the Passage tomb actually isn’t the earliest feature on the site. There are clear signs that the casement walling of the cairn overlays earlier stonework and ash layers. Unfortunately this area has been hit hard by the sea and much of the integrity of the lower (seaward) deposits have been compromised by the tidal movement of the sea”.



To the left: The entrance passage to the Chambered Cairn

Especial thanks are due to Russell and Kathryn Marwick, Kirsty Mainland, Norman Gibson, Carol Ray, Hellen Castle, Sarah and the people of Rousay. The excavations would like to thank Orkney Island Council and the Rousay Heritage Trust. Further information can be found at www.swandro.co.uk.