

## The Use of Space in Norse Houses: Some Observations from the Hebrides

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In this short chapter, I intend to briefly discuss the results of the recent excavation at the settlement of Bornais on the island of South Uist in the Western Isles of Scotland (Sharples 2005, 2012, 2020a and 2020b). The settlement at Bornais is located on the machair plain (a thick deposit of shell sand created by glacial activity) of the west coast of the island and is an unusually large settlement that covers approximately 4,625m<sup>2</sup> and comprises five discrete settlement mounds. The principal focus for the settlement is Mound 2, the largest settlement mound, in which excavation revealed a sequence of three large high-status houses (Figure 5.1). Houses 1 and 2 were bow-walled longhouses characteristic of the Norse settlement of the North Atlantic. House 3, in contrast, was a rectangular house which was short and wide in comparison to the earlier houses.

The chronology of this mound has been determined by the acquisition of a large number of radiocarbon dates (Marshall et al. in Sharples 2020a) and large quantities of material culture including dateable items, such as coinage. These indicate that House 1 was built in the late 9th or early 10th century and was used until the middle of the 11th century (Sharples 2020a: 94). House 2 was built in the second half of the 11th century and was abandoned early in the 12th century (Sharples 2020a: 137). House 3 was constructed in the middle of the 13th century and was abandoned possibly as late as the early 14th century (Sharples 2020a: 383). It was constructed after a long period when there appears to be no high-status residence present on Mound 2.

### The Early Norse houses

House 1 is approximately 23m long, but only small areas at the east and west end of this house were explored by our excavation, so understanding of this house is strictly limited (Sharples 2020a: 57). The east end was paved and an entrance was visible in the gable end. The west end, in contrast, had a charcoal-rich floor layer, and there was just enough

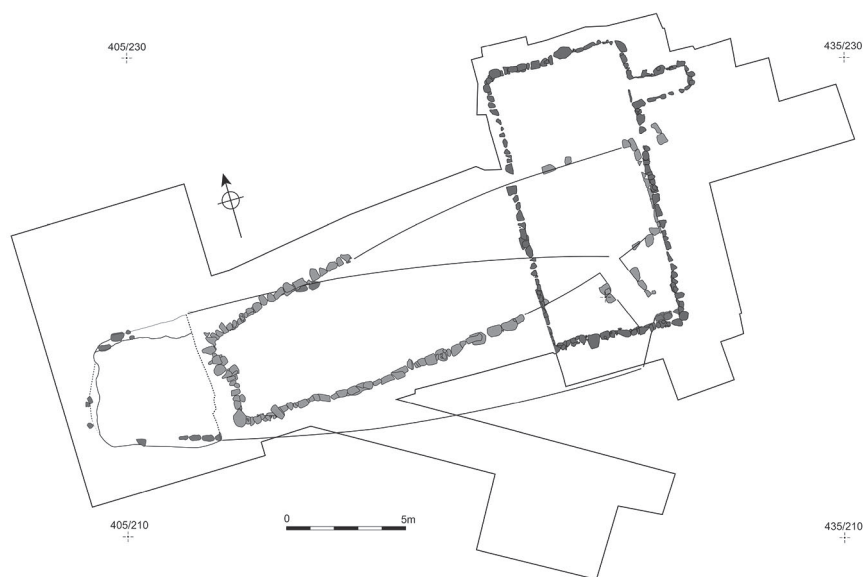


Figure 5.1 The sequence of large houses on mound 2.

excavated to reveal the presence of a central hearth area defined by thick deposits of peat ash. The floor contained a range of interesting finds, including a cluster of sherds from broken steatite vessels, imported from Scandinavia, and a large ceramic vessel, made on the island. Large amounts of timber appear to have been used in the construction of this house and a range of pits was found underneath the floor layer.

House 2 is just under 20m long and up to 5.8m wide and is defined by stone walls that survive in the west half of the house up to 1.3m in height (Sharples 2020a: 145). The entrance was placed on the south side close to the east gable wall and reused the original gable end of House 1. The house would have been largely subterranean, with perhaps only the gable ends and the roof showing above ground level.

The floor deposits (Figure 5.2) suggested the interior was divided into three aisles, though no significant structural postholes were observed. The central aisle was distinguished by an accumulation of multiple thin layers of orange, yellow and pink ash, which derive from the burning of peat and indicate the repeated raking out of the hearth deposits. This created a compact surface on which people could move through the interior of the house.

The stone walls of the house are well built and impressive and use substantial slabs that are otherwise rarely used in Viking and Norse houses. They probably came from the robbing of indigenous Iron-Age structures on the machair plain. This would be a socially significant as well as a functionally effective way of sourcing good building stone.



**Figure 5.2** A plan of the interior of House 2 showing the ash deposits covering the central aisle of the house and the paved area at the entrance.

The finds assemblage recovered from the floor of House 2 was substantial (Sharples, Pannett, Smith and Taylor in Sharples 2020a: 193); it included 689 small finds, over 2,953 potsherds and 1,957 identified animal bones. Almost all of the objects in these assemblages can be accurately located in the house. The highlights include:

- an antler cylinder decorated with a Ringerike-style animal
- a collection of unusual antler tine handles possibly associated with ritually charged feasting and drinking
- numerous exotic trinkets, including a fragment of green porphyry, the arm from an amber cross, clipped coins of Æthelræd II and Olaf Kyrre, eight glass beads, a lead pendant, a pearl and a small fragment of gold strip
- the comb assemblage was substantial, with sixty-six fragments, and could be classed as classic Irish Sea assemblage with a few relics, such as a fragment of a large Ambrosiani A comb, which could have been made over a hundred years earlier
- an assemblage of forty-eight bone, copper alloy and iron stick pins, almost half of which were complete
- a wide range of tools, including significant assemblages of knives, whetstones, spindle whorls and needles.

The ceramic assemblage was substantial and included many largely complete vessels which appear to have been smashed in situ at the west

1 end of the house. Most of the vessels were crudely made straight or  
2 slightly bow-sided bowls with sagging bases. There was very little evi-  
3 dence for ceramic platters being used in this house.

4 All the floor layers were bagged and floated, and a quantified pro-  
5 portion of the residues from these samples was sorted down to 2mm,  
6 providing large assemblages of materials rarely found on archaeologi-  
7 cal sites, including eggshell, crabshell, small mammal bones and worm  
8 casts. We have exceptionally complete assemblages of carbonised plant  
9 remains and animal, bird and fish bones. Barley dominated the assem-  
10 blage of carbonised grain, but oats, rye and flax were all present and  
11 there were very large concentrations of wild seeds from the goosefoot  
12 family (*Chenopodiaceae*) and dock (*Rumex/Polygonum* spp.; Summers  
13 and Bond in Sharples 2020a: 221). The principal animal species pres-  
14 ent were young cattle, a prime source of meat, sheep/goat, pig and deer  
15 (Powell, Best, Mulville and Sharples in Sharples 2020a: 226); and fish,  
16 largely herring, were also present (Ingram in Sharples 2020a: 230). It is  
17 clear that this was a well-provisioned household and the inhabitants had  
18 a rich and varied diet.

19 A detailed examination of the spatial patterning of the assemblages  
20 from House 2 suggests the house can essentially be divided into three to  
21 four rooms (Sharples in Sharples 2020a: 235):

- 22
- 23 1. the west end, which appears to be the principal cooking space defined
- 24 by the large quantities of pottery and the presence of numerous pits
- 25 2. the west central area is the principal social space where indoor activities
- 26 were undertaken and is characterised by large quantities of small finds
- 27 3. the east central area where distinctive activity is difficult to identify,
- 28 but it could possibly be for storage and/or sleeping
- 29 4. the east end was an area where rubbish such as shellfish, fish and
- 30 animal bones were allowed to accumulate.
- 31

32 The artefacts in the west central area give us a good indication of the  
33 types of activities that were undertaken inside this house. These included:

- 34
- 35 • drinking and the consumption of food
- 36 • the care and maintenance of the body
- 37 • spinning and sewing (but not weaving?)
- 38 • the use and maintenance of iron knives
- 39 • the systematic dismantling of antler combs
- 40 • the breaking-up of sheet iron vessel(s).
- 41

42 Many of these artefacts come in clusters that suggest they were depos-  
43 ited by individuals who had their own seating area within the living space  
44 at the west end of House 2 (Sharples 2020a: figs. 159–67). The large

quantity of objects present is also worthy of consideration. Many of the objects appear to have been discarded when they were still functionally useful: most of the pins were whole, for example. This was not a single abandonment deposit as the different objects were found within several separate layers that accumulated during the life of the house. It indicates a wasteful society that was content to throw away materials in a very casual manner.

## Comparisons

There are very few sites that we can compare Bornais to as the quality of the preservation and stratigraphy of this site is exceptional. The best parallels are in Iceland, and it is instructive to look at the spatial organisation of two settlements, Granastaðir and Aðalstræti.

The settlement at Granastaðir lies in Eyjafjarðardalur in northern Iceland and was excavated by Einarsson (1995). The main house was a bow-walled longhouse oriented north–south, with internal dimensions of 14.7m long and up to 5.4m wide. There are three entrances: an entrance on the west side towards the north gable; a subsidiary entrance opposite this in the north-east corner; and an entrance in the centre of the southern gable wall. This house was accompanied by another large building and a couple of detached subsidiary structures. Einarsson interpreted the main house as being divided into three rooms and follows Myhre’s interpretation of the Oma house in Norway (Myhre 1982):

- Room I in the north gable was identified as a kitchen, and work area, with a possible religious role
- Room II/III was a large central living room for work, leisure, recreation and consumption
- Room IV was in the south gable and was a storage or drying room
- an annex was added to the south end and this contained a kitchen and had a separate entrance
- a smoke house was added onto the east side of the house, but it was not directly accessible from the house.

Aðalstræti is one of the earliest known settlements in Iceland (Vésteinsson et al. 2006) and is located in the centre of Reykjavík in the south-west corner of the island. The house was oriented north–south and has internal dimensions of 16.7m by 5.8m. The principal or public entrance lies at the north end of the long east wall and has a porch projecting from the entrance; there is a subsidiary, or private, entrance in the south-west corner. The occupation of the house was thoroughly explored by Milek (2006).

1 This house has a symmetrical arrangement of internal space similar to that noted at Granastaðir. On coming through the main public entrance, one entered a vestibule which led into a transitional space at the north end of the central aisle. This was surrounded by numerous small rooms which could be for storage, or provide toilet facilities and animal stalling. The large central room had a distinctive stone-kerbed hearth area with a raised platform to the west, possibly with a timber floor, and a layer of ‘grass bedding’ covered a similar sized space to the east. At the south end was another transitional space surrounded by small rooms; one of these was for textile production and included a loom, and another may have been for washing/dyeing wool.

2 One of the important distinctions between these Icelandic houses and the houses in the Western Isles appears to be the location of the cooking area. At Bornais, both House 1 and House 2 appear to have the cooking area located at the west end, as far from the single eastern entrance as it was possible to be. This was also the case in the contemporary houses at Cille Pheadair (Parker Pearson et al. 2018) and Drimore (MacLaren 1974), also on South Uist.

3 At Granastaðir, it was suggested the hearth at the north end, close to the entrance, was for ceremonial or religious cooking (Einarsson 1995: 135), while the main kitchen was at the south end, where a subsidiary entrance was located. Similarly, at Aðalstræti there was no evidence for cooking at the south end of the house and the distribution of burnt bone was argued to indicate cooking was located at the north end of the central hearth, near the entrance (Milek 2006: 202). It is important to note that in both these houses there is a main entrance and a subsidiary entrance at the opposite end of the house, and that subsidiary entrances are a feature of many Icelandic houses (Milek 2006: 109), but not as far as we can see in the Hebridean houses.

4 These differences appear to mark a major social distinction in the use of space in the Hebrides and Iceland, which is worth thinking about. It seems clear from the historical record that cooking was primarily a female activity in Viking societies (Einarsson 1995: 135; Jochens 1995: 129) and therefore we might expect the cooking area to be the principal nexus of female activity within the house. In Iceland, this appears to be taking place in a public location visible to any individual entering the house, and this contrasts significantly with the situation in the Hebrides where the cooking area appears to be in the most inaccessible part of the house. These patterns suggest that women had a much more powerful and independent role in Icelandic society, at least in some households.

5 It is possible that this deep space at the west end of House 2 at Bornais was occupied by disenfranchised indigenous slaves. The presence of substantial quantities of pottery of distinctive Hebridean form in this location may be related to the presence of local women, as it has been argued that

the production of Norse ceramics indicates the continuity of local traditions of ceramic production (Sharples 2020b: 462). A desire to control the individuals occupying this part of the Hebridean houses might also explain the lack of a subsidiary entrance in this area.

### The Norse or Scottish house

These patterns can also be expanded upon if we consider the changes that take place in the 13th century at Bornais. On Mound 2, House 3 was built towards the beginning of the 13th century and is a completely different type of house from the bow-walled longhouses of Houses 1 and 2. House 3 had a distinctive playing-card shape and proportions, and was turf-walled with an internal timber frame that supported the roof (Sharples 2020a: 304). However, there was a single entrance at the north end of the long east wall, which is reminiscent of the earlier entrance arrangements. It is unclear whether the changes in the form of the house reflect increasing Scottish influence in the islands or indicate a local evolution of the Viking longhouse. Unfortunately, the numbers of excavated medieval buildings in Argyll and western Scotland are very limited and do not provide a clear delineation of the architectural traditions of the region.

The house had at least two separate floor layers (Figure 5.3). In the earliest floor, two hearths were present, located in the centre and south end of the house, but in the latest floor there was a central hearth and



Figure 5.3 The floor layers inside House 3. The earliest floor on the left and the latest floor on the right.

1 a hearth opposite the entrance; it was the latter hearth that seemed the  
2 most important. The defined oval spreads of ash that characterise these  
3 later hearths are very different to the earlier longhouse hearths that were  
4 long rectangular spreads of ash.

5 This change in the shape and location of the hearth is also visible in  
6 the lower-status houses, which are smaller, roughly 8m by 4m, but have  
7 the same shape. The last house at Cille Pheadair (Parker Pearson et al.  
8 2018: 212), which dates to the middle of the 12th century, has a long  
9 rectangular hearth. This contrasts markedly with the small rectangular  
10 hearth located opposite the entrance within the final house on Bornais  
11 Mound 3 (Sharples 2005: 53), which dates to the 14th century.

12 Another significant difference between the late rectangular houses  
13 and the early longhouses is the quantities of finds present in the house  
14 floors. The conspicuous consumption that was visible in the longhouses  
15 is noticeably absent in House 3 and the other excavated 13th- and  
16 14th-century houses. Very few finds were recovered from the various  
17 floor layers of House 3 (Sharples 2020a: figs. 249 and 262) and those  
18 that were found can mostly be explained as accidental losses and dam-  
19 aged waste. The distribution of food waste suggests that in the later  
20 houses most of the cooking activities were taking place around the  
21 hearth and close to the entrance. The deep space seems to be relatively  
22 underused and may have been a sleeping area.

23 The development of the small rectangular houses in the 13th century  
24 is associated with the appearance of ancillary buildings, which seem  
25 to serve particular specialist tasks. On Bornais Mound 3, the ancillary  
26 building was used for agricultural processing and included an external  
27 kiln and space for winnowing and crop storage (Sharples 2005: 86). On  
28 Mound 2A, one of the ancillary structures was a comb-maker's work-  
29 shop (Sharples 2020a: 451).

30 This fracturing of the domestic space into either separate buildings  
31 or separate rooms which served specialist functions can be observed  
32 across the North Atlantic in the 13th and 14th centuries. In Orkney  
33 and Caithness (Fenton 1978a), the tendency is for these spaces to be  
34 arranged end to end to create exceptionally long houses, whereas in  
35 Shetland (Tait 2012) and the Isle of Lewis (Fenton 1978b) they are  
36 often arranged side by side. In Iceland, the arrangement of spaces  
37 around a corridor creates a very distinctive structure known as the 'pas-  
38 sage house'. This is the period when the architectural elements that  
39 define the recent historical record emerge and develop their distinctive  
40 regional characteristics.

41 All of these developments seem to be an attempt to remove messy  
42 activities from the main domestic space, which becomes increasingly  
43 cleansed of artefacts. They also isolate particular activities in their own  
44 distinctive spaces. The spatial arrangement of these functional-distinct



buildings is regionally distinctive, but it is part of a general trend which is occurring all across the Scandinavian territories of the North Atlantic at this time.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that, despite the overall similarity between the longhouses in the Scandinavian territories of the North Atlantic, there are significant differences which highlight the different social position of females in the households of Iceland and the Hebrides. These differences are highlighted by the location of the cooking areas in the longhouses and how this is positioned in relation to the access to the house. In the Hebrides, cooking areas are embedded as far away from the entrance as possible. In Iceland, the cooking locations are often in public locations next to doors that provide immediate access to the outside. The degree of freedom available to the females undertaking cooking in the Hebrides seems to be constrained and suggests they could be slaves.

The spatial relationship of the hearth and the entrance change as the Scandinavian longhouses evolved during the 13th and 14th centuries in the Hebrides. New smaller, more formal, defined hearths are located in the middle of the house in front of the entrance and this becomes the focal point for cooking and food consumption. If one accepts that the hearth and cooking had a specific gendered significance, then this move suggests a major change in the social significance of women in these houses. A female located directly opposite the entrance would effectively control access to the house and all the internal space. Furthermore, most of the messy male activities related to craft and agricultural activities appear to have been moved to external buildings. This could be seen to indicate a decline in the social importance of the house, and it is noticeable that prestige objects related to competitive male activities were no longer found scattered around the interior of these later houses.

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