

The archaeology of Orkney

Some of the world's best prehistoric archaeology is found in Orkney and even the briefest visit to the islands will reveal an extraordinary landscape in which the past is preserved in stone. Perhaps the most vivid example is at Brodgar, a place of majestic beauty in any weather. Who could fail to be impressed by the Standing Stones of Stenness? Resilient symbols of unknown ancient beliefs, the tallest of these giant monoliths stands over 5m high. Four stones remain in a 30m wide circular henge setting that may have originally contained twelve. The nearby Watch stone is said to go to the loch to drink at midnight on Hogmanay, but dreadful misfortune befalls anyone who witnesses this event. Many similar legends are associated with Orcadian archaeological remains, demonstrating their longstanding importance to local people.

Nearby is Ring of Brodgar, a larger henge monument, complete with a deep ditch and 27 of its estimated original 60 stones still standing in a circle almost 104m in diameter. Tradition insists that you walk around the circle in a clockwise direction, and there are many things to see while you do this. Appreciate the landscape surrounding you, water almost all around, surrounded by flat fertile farmland. Beyond, the hills enclose a panoramic landscape that contains everything needed for farming life; arable land; hill pasture; and fresh water. Did the Ring of Brodgar, with its ditch mirroring the lochs around it, perhaps celebrate the importance of the fertile landscape for the new farmers of the Neolithic? Alternatively, did it measure astronomical events that marked the passing of the seasons? Brodgar must have been a significant place for Neolithic people.



THE RING OF BRODGAR

Within the Neolithic landscape around Brodgar is the chambered cairn of Maeshowe. Built in the Late Neolithic this monument was probably used for burying the dead. No direct evidence remains because the structure has been entered, and probably emptied, on more than one occasion in the past. Vikings broke in, seeking shelter from a storm, and inscribed runes and other carvings on the walls. The runes include triumphant messages about finding and removing treasure from the tomb; tributes to female beauty; and boasts about the various talents of the writers. The immense size of the stones from which the building was constructed is awe inspiring, as is the precision of the setting of these stones and the resulting beautifully faced walls within the chamber. The long, low entrance passage aligns with the setting sun at the winter solstice, which still illuminates the chamber today in the darkest days of the year. Did this bring hope of the return of the spring to the people who used the tomb? It certainly suggests that the building may not have been a place for sealing off the dead, but used by the living community as well.

Life in Neolithic Orkney was not all death, ritual and mystery. Some of the very few examples of Neolithic settlement in Britain can be found in Orkney, most notably the village of Skara Brae.



SKARA BRAE

A full-scale reconstruction of one house can be walked into and experienced first hand. Signposts on the short walk to the village emphasise the journey back in time taken on this visit to the Orcadian Neolithic. The village beside the beach, like the other sites mentioned, is authentic, not a reconstruction. The houses are furnished in stone with what may be beds, cupboards and storage tanks. Drains run under the village, suggesting that the Neolithic people had indoor plumbing, a feature lacking in many early twentieth century British homes.

These monuments form part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, The Heart of Neolithic Orkney.

A rare example of a Bronze Age house and burnt mound can be seen at Liddle, in South Ronaldsay. Burnt mounds are created by a process that involves heating stones in a fire then plunging them into a tank of water. The water is heated and can be used for cooking. The stones eventually crack under the strain of this heating and rapid cooling and when fragmented into pieces too small to be usable they are disposed of, generally nearby. The resulting heap of burnt, fragmented stones is known as a burnt mound. Numerous barrows containing burials, normally cremated, and sometimes with grave goods, have been excavated all over the islands testifying to a large and active Bronze Age population.

The Iron Age is also dramatically represented in Orkney, with monumental broch towers and surrounding villages. The importance of brochs in the Orcadian Iron Age is undisputed: they are believed to have been in use here longer than elsewhere, and their construction demonstrates great masonry skills, huge labour resources and a preference for architectural grandeur that reflects those of the Neolithic people. Possibly the homes of high status farmers, they would have been a conspicuous feature of the Iron Age landscape. Two good examples of broch villages can be visited at Gurness in Evie, and at Midhowe in Rousay. ➤



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During the Later Iron Age, people lived in small cellular houses, a reconstruction of which can be seen at Gurness. These Pictish farming people carved enigmatic symbol stones. The Norse arrived in Orkney in the 9th century AD and on the tidal island of the Brough of Birsay there can be seen the remains of both Pictish and Norse domestic, ecclesiastical and industrial structures. A replica of a carved Pictish stone, itself now weathering, stands on the site.

St Magnus Cathedral, in the centre of Kirkwall, also dates from Norse times; the long programme of construction work was started in the early 12th Century after the martyrdom of St Magnus. The builders of this Romanesque cathedral are believed to have been from the south, typifying the increasing weakening of links with Norway and strengthening of ties with Scotland over the next three hundred years. This eventually culminated with Orkney being pledged to Scotland as part of a marriage dowry in 1468.

The Orkney Archaeological Trust works to increase awareness of, and knowledge about these and other important archaeological monuments, sites and features to be found in the islands.

Jennifer Thoms



SKARA BRAE