

Neolithic Orkney (United Kingdom)

No 514rev

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Heart of Neolithic Orkney
<i>Location</i>	Scotland
<i>State Party</i>	United Kingdom
<i>Date</i>	26 June 1998

Justification by State Party

Maes Howe, Stenness, Brogar, and Skara Brae proclaim the triumphs of the human spirit away from the traditionally recognized early centres of civilisation, during the half-millennium which saw the first mastabas of the archaic period of Egypt, the brick temples of Sumeria, and the first cities of the Harappa culture in India.

Maes Howe is a masterpiece of Neolithic peoples. It is an exceptionally early architectural accomplishment. With its almost classical strength and simplicity it is a unique survival from 5000 years ago. It is an expression of genius within a group of people whose other tombs were claustrophobic chambers in smaller mounds. Stenness is a unique and early expression of the ritual customs of the people who buried their dead in tombs like Maes Howe and lived in settlements like Skara Brae. They bear witness, with an extraordinary degree of richness, to a vanished culture which gave rise to the World Heritage sites at Avebury and Stonehenge in England. The Ring of Brogar is the finest known truly circular Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age stone ring and a later expression of the spirit which gave rise to Maes Howe, Stenness, and Skara Brae.

Skara Brae has particularly rich surviving remains. It displays remarkable preservation of stone-built furniture and a fine range of ritual and domestic artefacts. Its preservation allows a level of interpretation which is unmatched on other excavated settlement sites of this period in Europe. Together, Skara Brae, Stenness, and Maes Howe and the monuments associated with them demonstrate the domestic, ritual, and burial practices of a now vanished 5000-year-old culture with exceptional completeness.

The monuments represent masterpieces of human creative genius (**criterion i**), in that they exhibit an important interchange of human values during the development of the architecture of major ceremonial complexes in Britain (**criterion ii**), in that they bear unique or exceptional testimony to an important indigenous cultural tradition which flourished over a period of between a millennium and half a millennium but disappeared by about 2000 BC (**criterion iii**), and as an outstanding example of a type of architectural ensemble and archaeological landscape which illustrates that significant stage of human history during which the first large ceremonial monuments were built (**criterion iv**).

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the Neolithic Heart of Orkney is a group of *sites*.

History and Description

History

The Neolithic period in the British Isles is mostly characterized by monumental architecture and a strong development of ritual. Collective burials and ceremonial enclosures appear, revealing a more complex social structure and a mobilization of the efforts of a large number of individuals towards a common goal.

Passage graves such as Maes Howe, built around 3000 BC, were large structures, made of stones ordered to form a passage leading from the outer edge of the mound to the chamber containing the remains of the dead. Whether these graves were meant for the elite or for all the people of the community is still not proven by the specialists, but the large amount of human and animal bones, pottery and other objects discovered in these mounds testify that they were important social and religious centres. The general orientation of these structures also demonstrate the knowledge of the builders in respect to seasonal movements. The passage of Maes Howe, for example, points close to midwinter sunset and the setting sun of winter solstice shines on its chamber.

The Ring of Brogar, a true circle formed by sixty tall standing stones with an outer ditch in circular form, also seems to have served the purpose of observing solar and lunar events, although conclusive evidence has not yet been brought forth by scientists.

In the same area, a Neolithic village of stone-built houses connected by passages was discovered and excavated. The earliest settlement started around 3100 BC. The site was then occupied for some 600 years. The buildings visible today are dated between 2900 and 2600 BC. The house styles vary according to the different periods of occupation, but the basic components of the interior remain the same: beds to either side and built into the walls, central hearth, and dresser, also in stone, in the back. Activities include

cattle and sheep herding, fishing, and cereal farming, all characteristic of Neolithic communities. This site also has evidence for ritual activity, closely interlinked with domestic activities, which is demonstrated by the presence of scratched shapes close to doors and divisions in the passages connecting the houses, caches of beads and pendants, and buried individuals inside some houses.

The structures of Orkney were built during the period extending from 3000 BC to 2000 BC. There is evidence for ritual re-use of the religious sites in the Early Iron Age, suggested by the presence of pottery in pits. The settlements, however, had a fairly short life span of about 600 years.

In the mid 12th century AD, Norsemen and Viking crusaders set foot on the islands. Carved runes on the stones of the main chamber of Maes Howe testify to their presence at that time. The site, quite isolated, is at the present time sited within what is essentially a pastoral landscape.

Description

The Orkney Islands lie 15km north of the coast of Scotland. The archipelago is composed of some 40 islands and numerous islets, of which only 17 are now inhabited. Tall cliffs and wide open grasslands form today's landscape.

The two areas selected are about 6.6km apart on the island of Mainland, the largest in the archipelago. The Brodgar Rural Conservation Area lies around an isthmus dividing the Loch of Harray to the east and the Loch of Stenness to the west; it includes the sites of Maes Howe, the Stones of Stenness, and the Ring of Brogar. The Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae is on the west coast of Mainland on the southern edge of the Bay of Skail, the size and shape of which have been altered considerably by erosion over the centuries. It was covered by an immense sand dune until 1850. Taking into account the substantial buffer zones, the nominated area covers close to 161km².

Maes Howe is a mound, 35m across and still 7m high, built partly on an artificial platform and surrounded by a ditch. Inside the mound are a passage and chambers made of large stone slabs; it was originally closed by a blocking slab. The main chamber is 4.6m square; the flanking side chambers held the remains of the dead and were probably the site of religious ceremonies. Excavations were carried out in the middle 1950s and again in 1973 and 1974, revealing the full extent of the structure.

The *Stones of Stenness* were set up around 3000 BC. Twelve large standing stones, the tallest over 5.7m high, were erected in the form of an ellipse pointing a little west of north and enclosed by a ditch 6m wide and 2.3m deep and an outer bank, both pierced by a causeway.

The Watch Stone is a monolith 5.5m tall at the south end of the causeway between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness. There is evidence that there were other monoliths in this area.

The *Ring of Brogar*, which is located 1.5km from the Stones of Stenness, is a series of sixty tall stones forming a true circle of 104m diameter surrounded by a ditch 5-6m wide and 3m deep. An area of some 10ha containing thirteen burial mounds and a stone setting surround the ring and form part of the same monument. The three most important, Salt Knowe, Plumcake Mound, and South Mound, were built and used between 2500 and 1500 BC.

The buffer zone also contains a number of funerary, ritual, and domestic sites that are contemporary with the nominated sites or have the potential to explain the rituals carried on these sites. The Barnhouse settlement, started before 3000 BC, is a crucial element of comparison for an understanding of the nominated monuments in their context. The settlement proves to have been a highly organized one, as demonstrated by its basic layout, which persisted over time, and by the existence of specialized areas for each industrial activity. Each house, built out of stone and turf, has the same interior arrangement as the one found in Skara Brae: a stone dresser in the back, a central hearth, and stone box beds on either side. Furthermore, a stone bearing carvings similar to those in Skara Brae and Maes Howe was found in Barnhouse.

When it was built 5000 years ago, the settlement of *Skara Brae* was further from the sea than it is at the present time, since the sea level was much higher then. The settlement is composed of stone-built houses which are free-standing. They have beds recessed in the walls, central hearths, and stone dressers in the back of the main room. Over time the house styles evolved, becoming larger and the beds being built out into the living space. One of the houses, built on an oval plan with a porch, was isolated beyond an open space at one of end the settlement; it is interpreted as a workshop because of the flint debris that it contained. The settlement was abandoned some 600 years after it was built, and most of the houses were emptied of their contents. The site was then covered by wind-blown sand.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The monuments in the nominated area and those included in the buffer zones are all protected by the United Kingdom Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, Section 28 of which states that altering or destroying protected ("scheduled") ancient monuments is punishable by law.

All the monuments except Skara Brae are within a Conservation Area designated under the provisions of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997. The 1994 National Planning Policy Guideline *Archaeology and Planning* (NPPG 5) and its associated Planning Advice Note *Archaeology - the Planning Process and Scheduled Monument Procedures* (PAN 42) provide advice to planning authorities on how to deal with protected

ancient monuments under the stringent development planning and control systems.

The Structure Plan prepared by Orkney Islands Council and approved by the Secretary of State for Scotland in 1979 is a strategic document. It formally acknowledges the uniqueness of Orkney's archaeological monuments and provides for strict control to be exercised to safeguard the archaeological heritage from injurious development.

Several of the adjacent areas and the buffer zones are protected under other legislative instruments. The Lochs of Stenness and Harray are designated under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and the Loch of Stenness is a candidate Special Area of Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna under the European Union Habitats Directive. The outer buffer zone in the Brodgar Rural Conservation Area was designated in 1980 as a National Scenic Area.

Management

The ownership of these monuments is shared by the State (Ring of Brogar) and private individuals (Maes Howe, Stenness, and Skara Brae). However, management of the nominated monuments, which are scheduled or in the process of being rescheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, is the sole responsibility of Historic Scotland, an executive agency within the Scottish Office responsible for administering the laws concerning the protection and the management of ancient monuments.

The Inspectors of Ancient Monuments of Historic Scotland are graduates with archaeological, historical, and cultural resource management expertise. They are centrally based in Edinburgh. The professional staff of Historic Scotland also includes fully trained architects with appropriate conservation expertise, who work at Regional and District level. Qualified conservators work from the Stenhouse Conservation Centre. The Technical Conservation, Research and Education Division commissions research and publishes technical reports on conservation topics. Its Superintendents of Works are fully qualified technical staff and in-house and external training is provided for its masons and other staff.

The Historic Scotland officials work closely with the local authorities, and in particular with the Island Archaeologist, who is a member of the staff of the Orkney Council Planning Department. There is also excellent cooperation with local voluntary bodies, such as the Orkney Heritage Society and the Orkney Archaeological Trust, and with the local inhabitants, who are strongly committed to the protection of the island's prehistoric heritage.

An overall management plan for the Heart of Neolithic Orkney and management plans specific to the major monuments of the nominated area (Skara Brae, Maes Howe, and the Stones of Stenness) are in course of completion. The aims of these plans are to ensure proper management of the site through public consultation and co-operation of all partners with

interests in that site. Major issues regarding the presentation of the site, the spreading of information, the environment, community life, and tourism are outlined and discussed, and there is provision for annual work plans.

The properties are inspected annually by the Regional Architect and the Principal Inspector. A Technical Officer visits each site every month. Day to day monitoring is by stewarding staff and the Monument Conservation Unit.

Tourism is a major issue, considering that some 91,000 visitors visit Skara Brae and Maes Howe every year. These arrive mostly by boat and buses. Guided tours are available and interpretation centres and interpretative boards provide background information for visitors. There are visitor centres at Maes Howe and Skara Brae, the former in a well preserved historic building.

Current management plans focus on the development of high-quality cultural tourism which makes use of basic information on site without impinging on the monuments themselves, and on controlling the flow of visitors by spreading them out over the sites by means of various activities.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The Norse runic inscriptions at *Maes Howe* were first recorded in 1862, following the clearance of the fallen roof structure the previous year. Scientific excavations, followed by consolidation, were carried out at Maes Howe in 1954-55 and again in 1973-74.

The *Stones of Stenness* were first recorded in 1700. In 1760, four of the original twelve stones were still standing and one was recumbent. By 1851 only three stones remained, one of them recumbent (this was re-erected in 1906). In 1908 a number of the stones were set up in the interior as a "dolmen." By 1973 the ditch surrounding the stones had been almost completely obliterated by centuries of ploughing and so a full scientific excavation was carried out, as a result of which it was possible to restore the stones to their original settings (but in a form that is completely reversible if further research shows this to have been erroneous) and to clear the ditch.

The first written reference to the *Ring of Brogar* dates from 1529. In 1792, eighteen of the stones were still erect and eight recumbent and by 1815, only sixteen were left standing, with seventeen fragments less than 1m high. The first accurate survey was carried out in 1854, when the record shows that, of the sixty original stones, thirteen were still erect, ten were prostrate, and thirteen survived as no more than stumps. When the monument was taken into State guardianship in 1906, most of the fallen stones were re-erected in their original sockets (but with the same safeguards as at Stenness); at the present time, 36 of the original sixty are now upright. The interior of the circle has never been excavated, but a section cut across the encircling ditch in 1973 showed it to have

been about 6m wide by 3m deep.. All the neighbouring mounds were excavated unscientifically in the 19th century.

In the mid 19th century the remains of *Skara Brae* were revealed when the overlying sand was swept away by a violent storm, and some clearance work took place in 1913. In 1924 it came into State guardianship and, following another storm shortly afterwards, a protective breakwater was built, when the opportunity was taken for limited excavation. Major scientific excavations were carried out in 1972-73. Further occupation sites have been revealed nearby by more recent storms and further excavations began in 1998.

A number of prehistoric settlements have been discovered in the buffer zone around Maes Howe, the Stones of Stenness, and the Ring of Brogar created by the Brodgar Rural Community Conservation Area. Some of these have been excavated in the 19th and later 20th centuries.

The overall state of preservation of all the monuments is good. Problems connected with dampness in the chamber at Maes Howe were solved by stabilization work carried out in the 1930s.

Authenticity

There is a high level of authenticity on all the sites that make up this nomination. Maintenance work began in the later 19th century on all of them, and it has been carried out systematically for much of the present century. In the late 19th century and early 20th centuries, some restoration work was carried out, respecting the principles of anastylosis as later defined by the Venice Charter (1964), at the Ring of Brogar and the Stones of Stenness. In both cases only original materials or, to a very limited extent, materials that were identical in character and origin were used, and care was taken to ensure that restored sections were clearly distinguishable from original structures.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Orkney in January 1999.

Qualities

The four monuments that make up the Neolithic Heart of Orkney are unquestionably among the most important Neolithic sites in western Europe. They provide exceptional evidence of the material and spiritual standards and beliefs and the social structures of this dynamic period of prehistory.

Comparative analysis

The obvious comparison are with the two groups of Neolithic monuments in the British Isles that are already on the World Heritage List: Stonehenge and Avebury (England) and the monuments of the Bend of the Boyne (Ireland).

The two great English henge monuments, with their surrounding landscapes, are unquestionably paramount. They represent, however, the flowering of the megalithic culture of the Neolithic period in a benign physical environment, where human settlement persisted for several millennia.

The chambered tombs of the Bend of the Boyne – Newgrange, Knowth, and Dowth – are exceptional examples of this type of funerary monument, both in size and in design. By comparison Maes Howe is a relatively modest structure.

The special qualities of the Orkney group which make it eligible for inscription on the World Heritage List alongside those mentioned above relate to its location and its nature. The physical environment of the Orcadian archipelago was a harsh one by comparison with that of the chalk uplands of southern England or the fertile Boyne valley, yet a society rich in culture established itself here and flourished for more than a millennium.

The cultural diversity of Neolithic Orkney is admirably represented by the four nominated monuments – two ceremonial sites, a large chambered tomb, and a sophisticated dwelling. The wealth of unexcavated contemporary burial and occupation sites in the buffer zone constitute an exceptional relict cultural landscape. As a group they serve as a compact paradigm of the megalithic culture of western Europe that is without parallel.

ICOMOS comments

In 1988 the State Party nominated Maes Howe, Stenness, and Brogar for inscription. In its evaluation, ICOMOS expressed its support in principle for this nomination. However, it regretted the fact that other Neolithic monuments on Orkney, and in particular Skara Brae, had not been included in the nomination. It also intimated that consideration might be given to “a proposal that would take into account the natural features of the Orkney Islands archipelago.” The ICOMOS recommendation that the nomination be deferred to enable the State Party “to draft a less restrictive proposal” was adopted by the Bureau at its 1988 meeting.

During the preparation of the revised nomination which is the subject of the present evaluation, consideration was given by the State Party to the possibility of nominating a large area of the island of Mainland as a cultural landscape. It was felt, however, that the Neolithic landscape had been obliterated to such an extent by post-medieval land allocation and use that Mainland could no longer be considered as a relict landscape of World Heritage quality. ICOMOS concurs in this decision, but applauds the decision of the State Party to include Skara Brae in the nominated property.

Brief description

The group of Neolithic monuments on Orkney consist of a large chambered tomb (Maes Howe), two ceremonial stone circles (the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar), and a settlement (Skara Brae),

together with a number of unexcavated burial, ceremonial, and living sites. The group constitutes a major relict cultural landscape depicting graphically life five thousand years ago in this remote archipelago.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, and iv*:

The monuments of Orkney, dating back to 3000-2000 BC, are outstanding testimony to the cultural achievements of the Neolithic peoples of northern Europe.

ICOMOS, September 1999