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Taken into State care:	1930 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:	2020

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# HOLM OF PAPA WESTRAY (SOUTH) CHAMBERED CAIRN



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## HOLM OF PAPA WESTRAY (SOUTH) CHAMBERED CAIRN

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# I. SUMMARY

## 1.1 Introduction

Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn<sup>1</sup> is an example of a Maeshowe-type of passage cairn. It is Neolithic in date and may have been constructed around the mid-4th millennium BC<sup>2 3</sup>, although there are no scientific dates from this monument. It is thought to have been used for human burials, probably of a nearby community.

It is located at the south end of the small island of Holm of Papa Westray, which lies off the east coast of Papa Westray in Orkney. The drystone monument is large and imposing, and visible from a distance. The island is uninhabited, and the site is reached by boat via arrangement with a local tour guide; as such, access is also affected by the prevailing weather/sea conditions.

The site comprises a grass-covered mound measuring some 38m by 19.5m, and 3m high; the long axis is aligned north-north-east to south-south-west and in plan it is rectangular with rounded corners. Access to the interior of the monument was originally via a long, low, narrow entrance passage, located midway along the east side of the mound. This leads into a large, subdivided, rectangular internal chamber, from which twelve small cells open out.

The site was opened in 1849 by Captain F. W. L. Thomas<sup>4</sup>, of the HM cutter *Woodlark*, who was surveying Orkney for the Royal Navy. His findings were only partially documented, and the site was left open to elements. It was subsequently taken into State Guardianship in 1930 and consolidated for public display. As a result, the chamber and cells are protected by a turf-covered concrete roof, and visitors enter the cairn via a hatch set into this, descending an iron ladder into the chamber; the original entrance passage is blocked by a grill.

Some site information is presented on a notice board attached to a large square stone plinth positioned on top of the cairn at the south end. Occupying the highest point of the islet, this stack of stone was originally built as a naval navigation marker (visible in Figure 4), likely in the 19th or

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<sup>1</sup> The site is referred to simply as 'Holm of Papa Westray Chambered Cairn' within the Historic Environment Scotland Scheme of Delegation for Properties in Care, however, in the following document it will be referred to as 'Holm of Papa Westray **South** Chambered Cairn' in order to distinguish it from the other two cairns on the islet.

<sup>2</sup> The fourth millennium BC encompasses the years 4000BC-3001BC.

<sup>3</sup> Bayliss et al 2017; Griffiths 2016

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Lieutenant F.W.L.Thomas

early 20th century. From a distance the monument has the appearance of a submarine, with the plinth representing the conning tower.

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

Holm of Papa Westray South is significant on several counts:

- The monument is an outstanding example of a Maeshowe-type of chambered cairn. It is well preserved and demonstrates several of the defining characteristics of this type of monument. It does not appear to have been altered or remodelled in prehistory.
- Neolithic carvings preserved within the chamber collectively represent one of largest groupings of artwork known from an Orcadian chambered cairn<sup>5</sup>. These carvings are well preserved and in situ; this is the only Neolithic funerary site in Orkney where both pecked and incised in situ decoration has been identified. The preservation of these motifs allows for an appreciation of their aesthetic and artistic value. It is possible to gain an insight into their original religious and symbolic meaning.
- Some unusual architectural features are preserved in this monument. There are a large number of cells (twelve), two of which are double cells. The chamber is very long and subdivided by two transverse or cross walls. The surrounding cairn is rectangular rather than circular (see Figure 1 plan).
- The monument preserves evidence of prehistoric construction techniques such as the careful pinning of stones to create level coursing, the use of very large stones around the chamber and large flagstones set on edge to form the roof of the entrance passage.
- It is one of several Orcadian monuments investigated by antiquarians during the 19th century.
- The monument has not been completely excavated and preserves information for future researchers.
- The monument displays early (1930's) examples of techniques of consolidation and display.

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<sup>5</sup> Thirty-four areas of possible decoration were identified in a recent survey of the interior stonework. See Thomas, 2019.

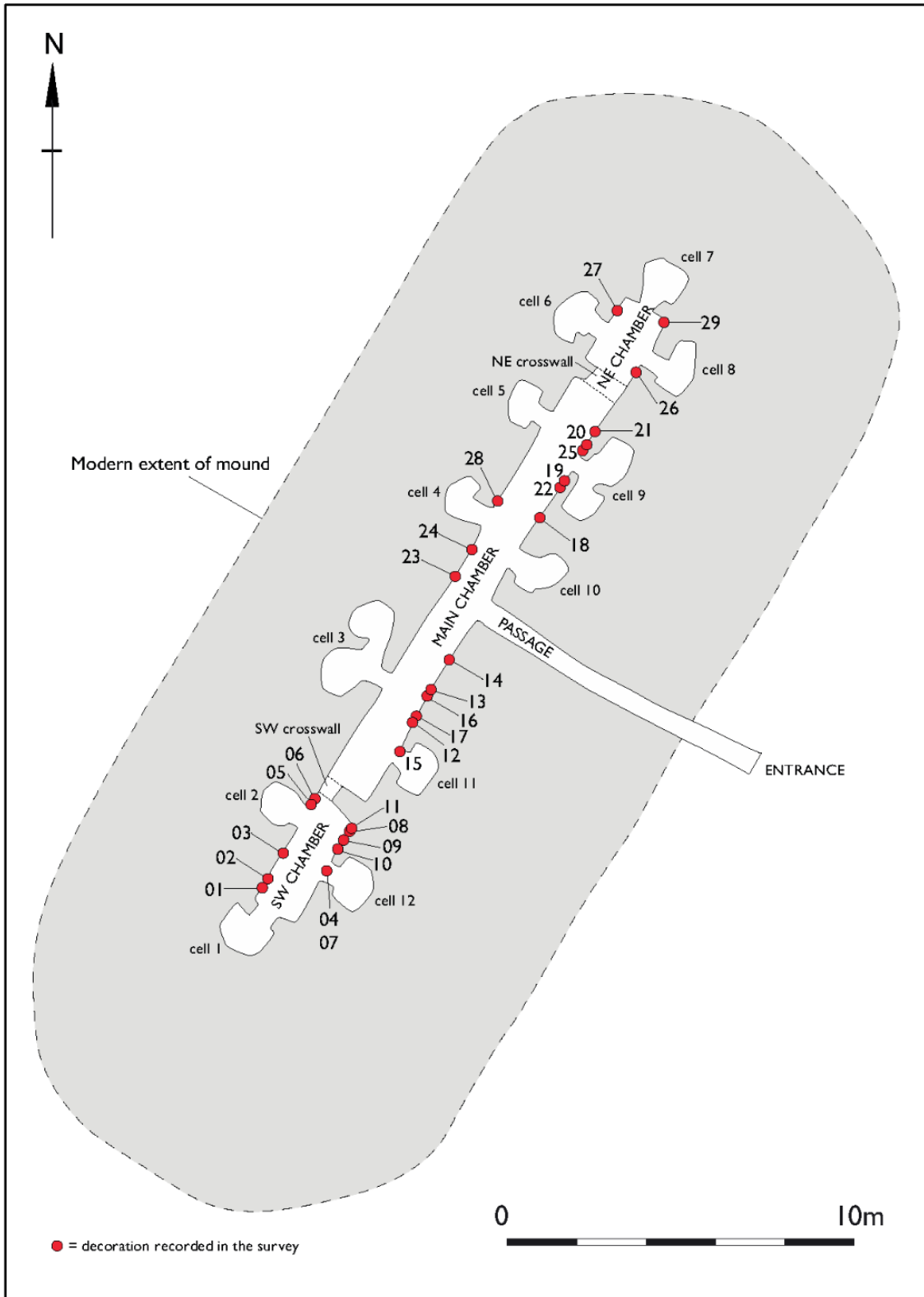


Figure 1: Plan of Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn, showing location of decorated stones recorded in 2018 survey of interior stonework. Note 'double' cells 3 and 9. Image produced by Antonia Thomas (2019, p18) and reproduced with kind permission.

The above paragraphs outline the key significance of Holm of Papa Westray South chambered cairn. The following sections offer more detailed descriptions and analysis of the site.

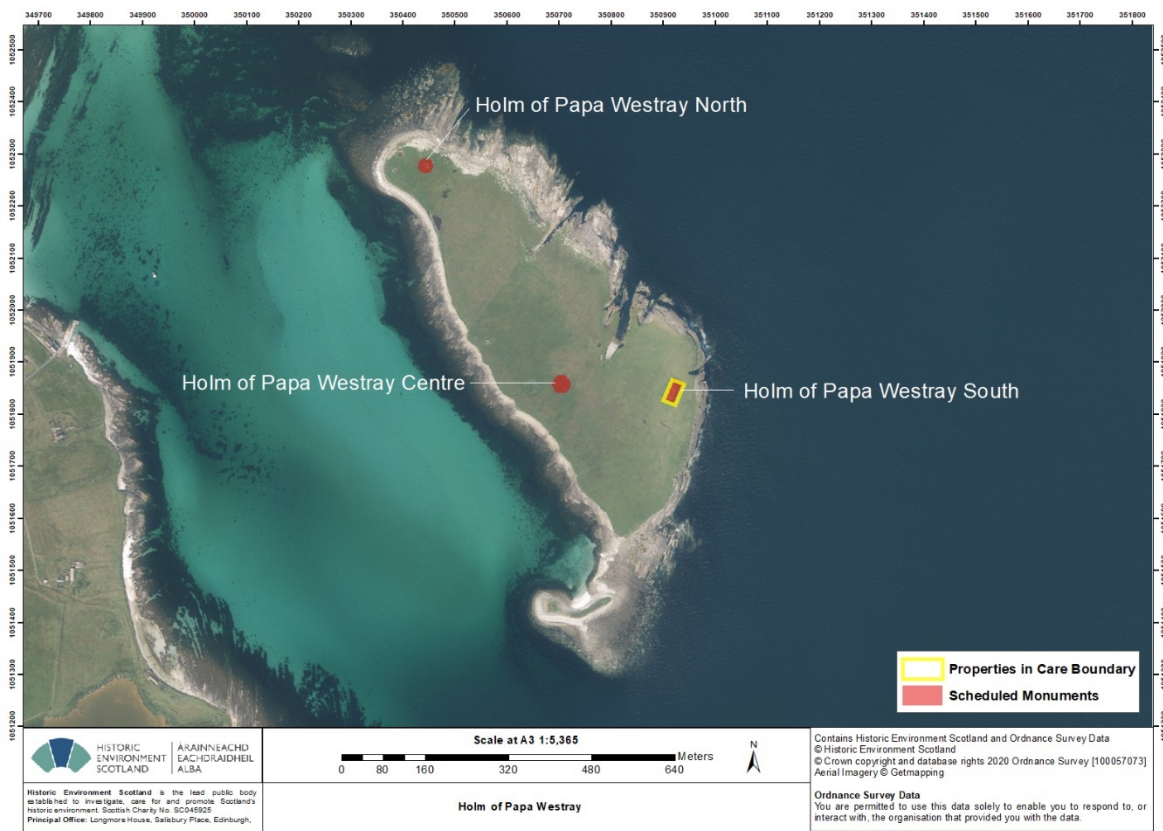


Figure 2: Location of site and neighbouring cairns on the Holm of Papa Westray.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

### 2.1 Background

The monument appears to have been constructed in one phase, comprising a large subdivided rectangular chamber, with small cells leading off, and a long entrance passage set within a rectangular cairn. A comprehensive description is provided in Davidson and Henshall<sup>6</sup>.

It is not known if any material associated with the construction or use of the monument has ever been recovered. Thomas<sup>7</sup> and Wilson<sup>8</sup> reported that a few animal bones were found in the chamber, but as Davidson and

<sup>6</sup> Davidson & Henshall 1989, 121-122

<sup>7</sup> Thomas 1852, 128

<sup>8</sup> Wilson 1851, 115



Henshall note, these are most likely to have been of recent date. Wilson also reports the presence of bones of domestic animals, 'deer-horns', edible molluscs and ashes *around* the cairn.

The entrance passage meets the chamber midway along its south-east side; it is 9.1m long and the inner 3.8m is roofed, partly using large stones set on edge. No evidence for the uses of the cairn survives, however it is assumed, on comparison with other similar sites in Orkney (e.g. Quanterness and Isbister chambered cairns), that it was constructed with the intention of holding the mortal remains of a community.

The chamber is divided into three parts, with the largest, central part measuring 13.5m in length. At either end are smaller spaces formed by transverse or cross walls. At the north-east end this compartment is 2.2m long, at the south-west end it is 3.4m. The end spaces are entered by small openings in the transverse walls. The total overall length of the chamber is 20.4m including the spaces at either end, plus the thicknesses of the transverse walls. The chamber varies in width between 1.2m and 1.4m. The transverse walls appear to have been integral to the construction of the monument. A total of twelve small openings in the walls of the chamber lead into small cells, two of which are paired or double cells.

Like the cells, the chamber was once corbelled, and some oversailing masonry is preserved. The walls currently stand to a maximum height of 2.6m and were originally higher. A few of the transverse capstones which roofed the chamber survived until the early 19th century<sup>9</sup>.

Several stones in the interior are decorated. With only a few exceptions, the markings on the stones appear to be contemporary with the construction of the tomb<sup>10</sup>. Davidson and Henshall<sup>11</sup> listed eleven decorated stones, but more recent work<sup>12</sup> has located more, with thirty-four areas of possible marking or decoration now identified<sup>13</sup>. Aside from one example of lightly-incised decoration, all of the recorded marks appear to have been pecked or ground into the surfaces of the stones<sup>14</sup>, and take the form of various motifs, including cup-marks, an inverted 'V', circles, a zigzag and an unfinished joined lozenge. Of particular note is a lintel over the entrance into the south-west cell in the south-west end of the chamber, which bears two pecked 'eyebrow' motifs; these motifs each comprise a pair of cup-marks under double arcs. This motif has also been found on a

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas 1852, 128

<sup>10</sup> Thomas 2019, 28

<sup>11</sup> Davidson & Henshall 1989

<sup>12</sup> Bradley et al 2000, Thomas 2016, 5; 2019

<sup>13</sup> Thomas 2019, 6; see page 30 for discussion of 'unlocated' decorated stones which had previously been identified but were not located in the 2018 survey of interior stonework.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas 2019, 6

figurine (the so-called 'Westray Wife') and on a stone within the wall of a building at the nearby, contemporary, Guardianship site of **Links of Noltland**<sup>15</sup>, Westray (Figure 3).

There is a suggestion that parts of the cairn were deliberately decommissioned when the monument eventually fell out of use. Antiquarian records<sup>16</sup> indicate that some of the cells were infilled with rubble and bone from above, to a level higher than the tops of their doorways. The deliberate filling of chambers and cells has been recorded from other chambered cairns<sup>17</sup>.

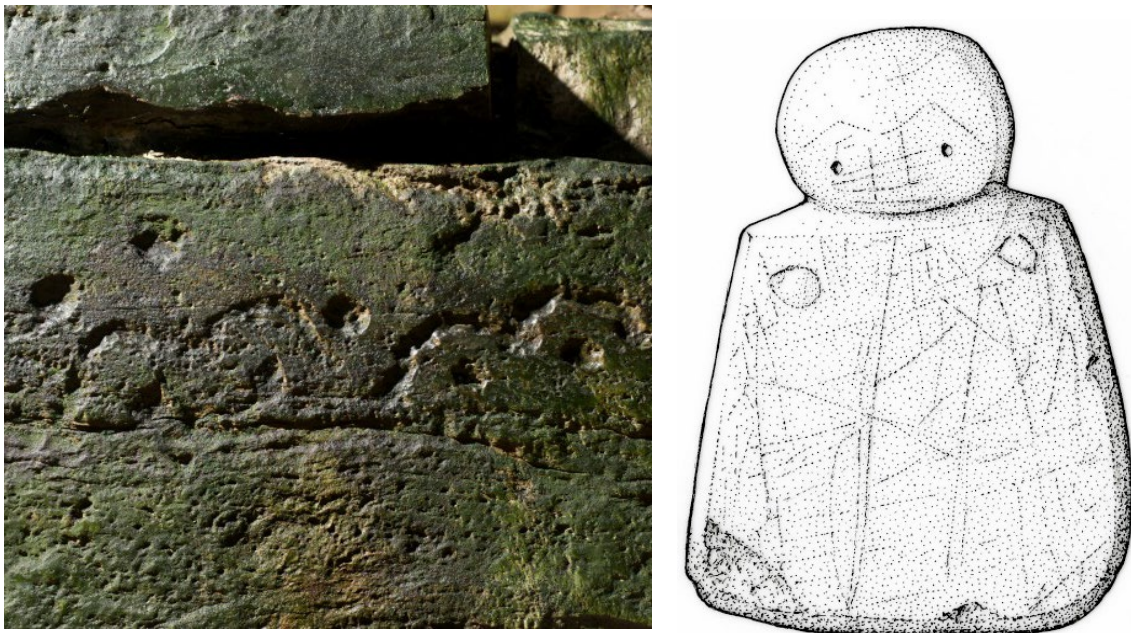


Figure 1: Comparison of 'eyebrow' motif on stonework within Holm of Papa Westray South (photograph - left), and on 'Westray Wife' figurine (illustration - right) recovered from Links of Noltland. Not to scale. [Motifs in left image corresponds to no.4 on Figure 1 plan]

## 2.11 Antiquarian interest

The monument was investigated in 1849 by Captain F. W. L. Thomas, an antiquarian who was active in Orkney at this time. Thomas had been invited by Thomas Traill of Holland, Papa Westray, to investigate the so-called 'Pict's House' on the Holm. No coherent records of this work survive, although some notes were published<sup>18</sup>. It is not now possible to identify all

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at:

[www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/](http://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/)

<sup>16</sup> see Davidson & Henshall 1989, 122

<sup>17</sup> Ritchie 2009, 33

<sup>18</sup> Thomas 1852

of the features which were recorded by Thomas. He describes an entrance passage that was 5.5m long, which is shorter than it is currently. The outer 5.3m now curves slightly to the east; it is possible that this outer (unroofed) element is, at least in part, a reconstruction. Thomas also noted the presence of a wall, which he saw on either side of the entrance passage at a distance of 5.5m from the chamber. This is no longer visible, but it may have functioned as a retaining wall and have marked the original outer limit of the cairn; the present edge deriving from later disturbance and slumping.

Parts of the chamber roof are known to have survived into the early 19th century.

Following Thomas's intervention, the site was left open and unprotected. It gradually deteriorated, and by Joseph Anderson's visit in 1872, the tomb was "much dilapidated"<sup>19</sup>, while Hugh Marwick described it as being "in a deplorable state of collapse" in 1925<sup>20</sup> (Figure 4, below). It was eventually taken into Guardianship.



*Figure 2: Early 20th century image (1929?), prior to limited consolidation and installation of concrete roof in the 1931. Following its excavation, the tomb was left open and suffered considerable deterioration prior to entering State care. Note presence of drystone stack as naval navigation marker cairn on the highest part of the island. © Crown Copyright: HES.*

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<sup>19</sup> Anderson 1886, 283

<sup>20</sup> Marwick 1925, 31

## 2.12 Guardianship

The monument was taken into State Guardianship in 1930 (Property in Care [PIC] ID: PIC300). A sky-lit concrete roof was constructed in 1931 and new access arrangements were installed which utilised a hatch in the roof with a ladder leading down into the interior of the chamber. This represents an early example of a 'cover house'. This was sited to avoid disturbance to the exposed stonework. Some limited restoration works were carried out<sup>21</sup>, but this appears to have been limited to certain decorated stones being 'reinstated' to their current positions during the consolidation works<sup>22</sup>. Overall, the stonework appears to have been left much as it was found prior to State intervention.

## 2.13 Designation

The site was originally scheduled in 1929, before entering State Guardianship in 1930. The scheduling documentation was later found to be incomplete, and as such, the monument was formally scheduled on 25th June 1996 as *Holm of Papa Westray South, chambered cairn* (reference: SM90163). The present scheduled area is a rectangle 46m by 23m, aligned north-north-east/south-south-west (see Figure 2). The scheduling includes the modern concrete roof with access hole, but excludes the hatch, runners and ladder which provide access to the interior.

## 2.2 Evidential values

The core evidential values of Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn are:

- The physical form and construction of the monument
- The presence of decorated stones
- Social organisation
- Symbolic and religious meaning
- The potential of the monument for further work

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<sup>21</sup> See Thomas 2019 for identification of areas of stonework replacement or reconstruction.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas 2019, 28-30



*Figure 3: Interior view of Holm of Papa Westray South, looking south-west. Note large blocks of stone used in construction.*

## 2.21 Evidential values

The monument displays the skill of the Neolithic builders in both planning and construction. Large blocks of stone were carefully placed in certain locations, often using small pinning stones to precisely adjust their alignment and orientation. Large quantities of stone were quarried and moved. In addition to the examples of decorated stonework, many of the stones include geological features forming natural ‘cups’ and meandering lines. The high concentration of these naturally marked stones suggests that these characteristics were deliberately selected for inclusion in the structure<sup>23</sup>.

Holm of Papa Westray South chambered cairn is a well-preserved example of a Maeshowe-type of cairn<sup>24</sup>. As such, it contains a rectangular chamber entered at the side via a long passage. Cells lead off the chamber and several stones are decorated. Many of the stones used in the construction are very large, which is a feature of many Maeshowe-type cairns.

Amongst this group of sites, the cairn is unusual for the extreme length of the chamber, the cross or transverse walls at either end, and for the large number of cells, two of which are double cells. The cairn in which it is set is

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas 2019, 28

<sup>24</sup> see Davidson & Henshall 1989, 37-51

rectangular rather than circular and there is the suggestion of a retaining wall, a feature not commonly seen at other similar sites.

The monument thus illustrates many of the features taken to define this particular type of chambered cairn ('Maeshowe-type'). At the same time, however, the presence of some less typical features demonstrates that a level of variation was acceptable to the builders, and users, of the monument, and challenges attempts to tightly define cairn typologies.

## 2.22 Decorated stones

The presence of several in situ decorated stones within the chamber is significant. It is very rare for such artwork to survive in its original setting. Decorated stones associated with the cairns at Eday Manse and Pierowall, for example, were found ex situ and the relationship between tomb and artwork has had to be inferred.

In addition, the artwork here appears to have been deliberately placed in certain locations for visual impact, for example on lintel stones and around certain cell openings<sup>25</sup>. It therefore offers the potential to understand the symbolic placement of art in Neolithic society in greater detail<sup>26</sup>. The location of the decoration has parallels with settlement sites such as **Skara Brae** and **Links of Noltland**, also in Orkney.



*Figure 4: Examples of decorated stones in south-west chamber (no. 5 and 6 on Figure 1 plan).*

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas 2019, 26

<sup>26</sup> see Bradley 2000

## 2.23 Social organisation

The cairn is important because it preserves information regarding social organisation. The particular design would have accommodated the performance of some certain ceremonies and not others. It embodied a particular set of beliefs surrounding the individual, ancestors and their relationships with their world and afterlife.

Construction would have required planning and cooperation with other groups around Orkney and possibly further afield; the similarities in design between this and other cairns implies shared beliefs and knowledge of other's ceremonies.

## 2.24 Symbolic and religious meaning

It is likely that the cairn embodies some of the symbols and religious beliefs of the community. The length and narrowness of the entrance passage, for example, emphasises a division between the interior and exterior, and may emphasise notions of selective or restricted access. The presence of so many cells may have represented divisions or groupings within the society.

## 2.25 Further work

Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn has never been scientifically excavated. The antiquarian investigations carried out by Thomas were apparently limited to the tombs interior, and were not concerned with the construction of the outer cairn, or what lies beyond it. These explorations were not properly recorded and it is not known what, if anything, was recovered from the interior. Petrie noted the presence of bone in the rubble fill of some cells, but it is not known if this was human or animal, or how it related to the use of the monument. The monument still retains the potential for useful further work, however.

It is not known if the floor of the chamber was investigated by Thomas or, as is most likely, that he simply emptied it out to reveal the most obvious features. The consolidation work which took place during 1931 is poorly recorded, however it too seems only to have involved a rapid tidy out. The potential for the survival of floor deposits is not known but in the light of the discovery of pits in the floor of the tomb chambers at Quanterness<sup>27</sup> and **Quoyness**<sup>28</sup>, it is possible that similar features may be present here.

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<sup>27</sup> Renfrew 1979

<sup>28</sup> Farrer, 1867

Despite issues with moisture retention and algal growth on the stonework, the cairn remains in good condition below the level of the concrete roof. As the roof was designed and installed to avoid disturbance to the major structural features, the monument retains structure and integrity, making it possible to further investigate the form of the cairn and gather more details of its construction and original form.

The cairn preserves the original land surface lying below it. This would indicate potential for micromorphological analysis to yield further information.

## **2.3 Historical values**

The historical values of Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn centre on its architectural features and the history of antiquarian exploration and modern intervention at the site. It preserves the ability to demonstrate Neolithic belief systems together with symbolic and religious practices, in conjunction with other similar sites. The following themes are demonstrated:

- Morphology
- Burial rites and funerary practices
- Neolithic artwork
- Antiquarian investigations
- State intervention

### **2.31 Morphology**

The monument preserves many of the architectural features particular to its class including the presence of small side cells, a long entrance passage, a rectangular chamber and the use of large stones in construction. It also preserves a range of more unusual features, such as the crosswalls, double cells. The cairn is an important record of a community's belief systems as well as the nature of its contacts with other groups around Orkney.

### **2.32 Burial rites**

No human remains are known to have been recovered from Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn. Comparison with other sites around Orkney make it clear, however, that it most likely was designed to hold human remains. The exact form in which bodies were placed is uncertain. They may have been whole or partial, they might have been allowed to



decompose prior to deposition within the chamber and cells. Likewise, the identities of the individuals and whether the remains of the whole community were permitted to be placed there is debated<sup>29</sup>. Some bodies or body parts were probably moved around within the chamber and cells or even eventually removed completely.

Further work elsewhere in Orkney will allow for a fuller interpretation of this monument; it is an important element within the story of the Orcadian Neolithic.

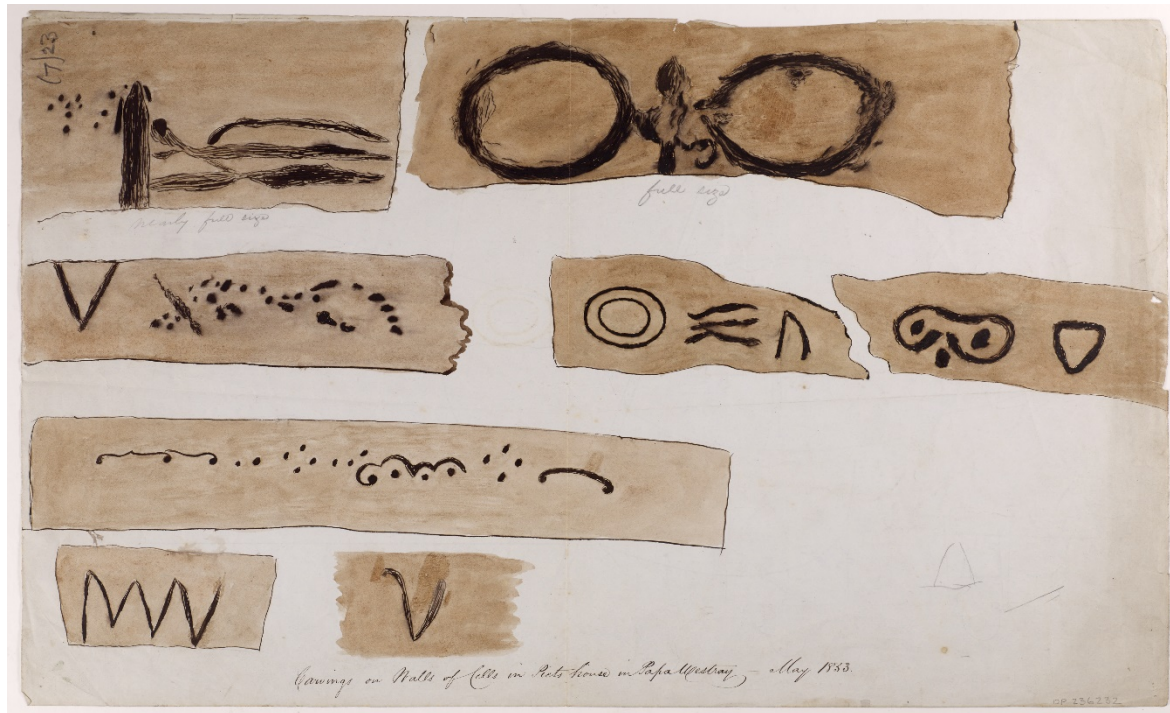


Figure 5: Example of George Petrie's 1857 sketches of decorated stones within the interior of Holm of Papa Westray South. © Courtesy of HES (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection).

### 2.33 Artwork

The chamber preserves Neolithic artwork, demonstrating a range of designs on the interior stonework<sup>30</sup>. Artwork in cairns is rare and the site is important in preserving in situ examples. The designs are varied and can be paralleled at other sites. However, Holm of Papa Westray South is exceptional in being the only Orcadian Neolithic funerary site in which both pecked and incised decoration have been identified<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> see Lawrence 2006 etc

<sup>30</sup> See Thomas 2019 for a comprehensive survey

<sup>31</sup> Thomas 2019, 14

### 2.34 Antiquarian investigation

The study of past antiquarian/early archaeological works is a growing interest. Many important sites have been subject to such works and it is difficult to understand the present form of a monument without reference to these early investigations. Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn preserves a record of Captain Thomas's works, carried out in 1849. Thomas was a prominent figure among these antiquarians and is a historical figure in his own right as commander of the small survey ship, *Woodlark*. The site was also visited and commented upon by the respected local antiquarian George Petrie, who identified and illustrated a number of decorated stones, drawing comparisons with examples from e.g. Newgrange and Dowth<sup>32</sup>. Petrie's early record has proved invaluable, as the stonework and visibility of the carvings later suffered considerable deterioration after the site was left open to the elements, before entering Guardianship.

### 2.35 State intervention

The monument demonstrates the nature and effects of State intervention in consolidation, preservation, display and interpretation. It is an early example of a site being taken into State care in order to prevent further deterioration of the remains. The consolidation works took pains to preserve the monument as it then survived. The concrete roof was designed to interact as little as possible with the walls, leaving the wall heads clear and visible within the interior and allowing for an appreciation of construction methods (e.g. see Figure 5). Elements of the cairn as it is now visible reflect the nature of this intervention and the understanding of those who carried it out. The extended length of the entrance passage together with its slight eastward curve probably derive from this point in time.

Regrettably, the concrete roof appears to have been constructed directly atop the surviving stonework, creating issues with moisture retention and algal growth. However, the condition of the monument is closely monitored, particularly with regard to any vulnerable carvings.

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn is a well-preserved example of a Maeshowe-type of chambered cairn and as such is distinguished from other types of Neolithic cairns such as Horned, Tripartite, Stalled or

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<sup>32</sup> Petrie 1866, 3

Bookan. There is much debate concerning the relative dates of these various typologies, as well as the significance of their forms.

It has been proposed that the smaller, simpler monuments such as the tripartite cairns were used by smaller groups, and gradually evolved into larger and more complex forms accommodating entire communities. The larger cairns such as that at **Midhowe** on Rousay would thus be a later development, perhaps occurring from the second half of the fourth millennium BC<sup>33</sup>. In this schema, **Maeshowe**, with its huge mound, extremely fine stonework and very large stones, represents a final flourish of the Later Neolithic. The relative dating of the cairns has been influenced by perceived similarities between house and tomb designs, with the cairns taken as representing ‘houses for the dead’<sup>34</sup>. Early Neolithic settlements such as **Knap of Howar** share some features with stalled cairns<sup>35</sup>, while Later Neolithic settlements such as **Skara Brae** share features with Maeshowe-type cairns.

Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn is identified as a Maeshowe-type and, as such, could be taken to represent a later architectural development, embodying changes taking place in ritual and religion around the end of the fourth<sup>h</sup> and into the early third millennium BC. Recent work has challenged this simple picture, however; Ritchie’s work at Holm of Papa Westray North has suggested a mid-4th millennium date for deposition of bone within this small stalled cairn<sup>36</sup>, while Griffiths<sup>37</sup> suggests a similar date for Maeshowe-type cairn construction.

Very few secure scientific dates have so far been obtained from chambered cairns, however, and more work is essential before these monuments can be confidently assigned their place in the development of Orcadian Neolithic society. This site is an important survival and retains the potential to inform this key debate.

The artistic value of Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn lies partly in elements such as its fine stonework and design. The preservation allows for an appreciation of the skills of the craftspeople, and the design shows how ritual and religious considerations were formalised and realised in stone.

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<sup>33</sup> Griffiths, 2016

<sup>34</sup> Ritchie, 1979

<sup>35</sup> However, the more recent discovery of early timber houses has prompted an alternative reading, in which stalled houses are instead construed as a conscious replication of tomb architecture – see Richards and Jones, 2016, 40

<sup>36</sup> Ashmore 2009, 62, Illus 29, see also Griffiths 2016

<sup>37</sup> Griffiths 2016, figs 10.10, 10.11

The decoration on the stones in the chamber appears likely to have had a symbolic or religious function, given their presence within a funerary monument. This is most likely shown by the vocabulary of designs together with their location, for example on lintel slabs above the entries to cells. The decoration can also be appreciated on artistic grounds. It is a record of individual skill and agency and the carvings have artistic value. They are an expression of a distinctive Neolithic attitude to art and can be appreciated in their original setting.

It is likely that some elements of the architecture of the cairn also display an artistic sensibility. The stonework acts in functional and symbolic ways, for example, to define spaces within the interior or control movement. Yet it is debatable whether some aspects such as the choice of a particularly large lintel stone, or the care taken in aligning the stones in a wall with small pinning stones, was not undertaken with an artistic or aesthetic intention in the mind of the builders.

## **2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values**

The landscape and aesthetic values of Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn can be divided into those contemporary with its Neolithic construction and use, and those which impinge upon the monument as it now stands, since the landscape has changed greatly. Key aspects include:

- Landscape change
- Nearby sites
- Modern landscape form

### **2.51 Landscape change**

Sea levels have risen since the cairn was constructed, giving rise to the large number of small islands which today form the Orkney archipelago. During the Neolithic period, however, Orkney would have comprised of fewer, larger landmasses. It is likely that the Holm of Papa Westray formed part of a larger landmass which also took in what today are the islands of Papa Westray and Westray.

### **2.52 Nearby sites**

The Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn is one of three chambered cairns located on the Holm of Papa Westray (see Figure 2). A small stalled cairn at the north end of the island known as the 'Holm of Papa Westray North' cairn, has been excavated to modern standards and

has been radiocarbon dated to the mid-4th millennium BC<sup>38</sup>. A large mound located to the north west ('Holm of Papa Westray Centre') represents a possible third. This is also thought to represent a stalled cairn and therefore potentially to be earlier in date than the Holm of Papay Westray South Chambered Cairn. There were possibly more cairns, which are not now visible.

The Holm of Papa Westray bears striking similarities to other promontories around Orkney which contain numbers of funerary monuments. Examples include Els Ness and Tofts Ness on Sanday, and Berst Ness on Westray. It is likely that this kind of landscape setting was a key factor which influenced the choice of location for the monument.

The Holm of Papa Westray can be understood in the context of a funerary landscape and it is likely that the physical nature of this landscape led to its use for burials. Any understanding or interpretation of this monument must take its wider setting and the possible presence of undiscovered funerary remains into account.

The cairn was a prominent part of the landscape when in use and remains so today. It is not known whether the construction of the monument followed the consecration and use of the promontory for burials over many generations, or whether it demonstrates an early adoption of the area for funerary use. The presence of at least one and possibly two stalled cairns nearby (see Figure 2) suggests that it represents the latest in a sequence of burial monuments located in this location.

## 2.53 Modern landscape form

The Holm of Papa Westray is now a small island. Its physical separation from Papa Westray makes access to the monument difficult, yet this remoteness also emphasises an aspect of other-worldliness to the landscape and the cairn. Most visitors now undergo a long and complicated set of journeys to reach Papa Westray. Even then, the visitor may find that tides and weather prohibit access to the site itself, though it can be seen in the distance<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> Ashmore 2009

<sup>39</sup> In such an event, exploration of the free 3D photogrammetric model may provide an alternative means of access. Available at: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/holm-of-papa-westray-south-chambered-cairn-cb8ed6f9a467461292f3cfcf1ee1ce93>

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn sits on the summit of a gentle rise, at the south end of what is now an island. The bedrock geology is of Upper Stromness Flagstone formation, with superficial Marine Beach deposits at the northernmost and southernmost tips of the Holm<sup>40</sup>.

The island is currently used as rough grazing. It is not known in detail how the landscape around the monument was farmed in the Neolithic<sup>41</sup>. The coastline has been in retreat at least since the time of the first settlers, and the coastline continues to erode.

The site and its environs support maritime vegetation and lichens. The drystone walls offer shelter for small mammals, invertebrates and birds in this treeless, exposed landscape. The island itself is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, being home to a breeding colony of Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grille*)<sup>42</sup>, and a Special Protection Area as an important breeding site for both Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) and Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)<sup>43</sup>.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

### 2.7.1 Visitors and visitor amenities

Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn is an unstaffed site, and while annual visitor numbers are not recorded, it is estimated that around 250 people visited the monument in 2019 between May to October 2019. It is open all year round, though access can be difficult especially during the winter months. Access is via arrangement with a local tour guide.

There are no amenities for the visitor, unless one includes the shelter afforded by the chamber itself. An interpretation board provides visitors with information about the site.

The remoteness of the site definitely *attracts* some visitors, who value the unique feeling of isolation at the site and the opportunity it presents to get away from the modern day. This sensation is emphasised when one reaches the interior of the cairn, where one is cut off from the outside world (and the prevailing wind!).

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<sup>40</sup> British Geological Survey 2020, Geoshore index accessible at:

<http://mapapps2.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/home.html>

<sup>41</sup> But see Ritchie 2016 for an in-depth discussion of sheep grazing on seaweed etc.

<sup>42</sup> <https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/792>

<sup>43</sup> <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/list-of-spas/>

The monument is a visible survival from the remote past of a small island community. It is a distinctive part of the tourist infrastructure and valued highly by those who live nearby. All visitors must, by virtue of the monument's remote location, expend resources to reach it, and this supports the local economy.

## 2.72 Astronomical associations

There is a large and growing interest in the astronomical alignments of some monuments. The alignment of the entrance passage to **Maeshowe** with the midwinter sunset, for example, has been demonstrated.<sup>44</sup>

There are no known astronomical associations of the Holm of Papa Westray South Chambered Cairn.

## 2.73 Folklore/spiritual values

There are no known folklore values associated with the monument. It is likely that the site attracts visitors with an interest in prehistoric beliefs and also those who seek spiritual encounters at sites of ancient significance.

## 2.74 Fishing mark

As the highest point on the isles, the monument was traditionally used by fishermen as a 'mark' or navigation aid. It was known as the 'Disses o' the Holm' by fishermen at sea (from Old Norse: 'dys', a cairn)<sup>45</sup>.

# 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

- No scientific dates exist for the monument.
- It is not known if any of the orientations of the monument, in particular the entrance passage, were meaningful.
- The precise original alignment and length of the entrance passage is unclear.
- No detail is known of the outer cairn construction, such as whether it was originally retained by an outer wall face, as suggested by F.W.L.

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<sup>44</sup> [www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/maeshowe-chambered-cairn/](http://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/maeshowe-chambered-cairn/) accessed December 2019)

<sup>45</sup> Marwick, 1925, p46

Thomas's work. The outer cairn may also have included decorated stonework, which is no longer exposed.

- It is possible that floor deposits survive in the tomb's interior, along with features including cuts, pits and a possible unexcavated cell.
- Thomas (2019, 30) lists five decorated stones which have previously been recorded, but whose locations are currently unknown. It is possible that more artwork remains to be discovered, following Bradley et al (2000) and the recent detailed survey work by Thomas (2016; 2019), and further fieldwork should take account of this.
- More research is required on the setting of the cairn to establish the nature of known sites (e.g. Holm of Papa Westray Central) together with a survey to establish the presence of more burial and other types of monuments on the island.
- Research is required on the stones which form the monument. All appear to be quarried, but it is not known whether they derive from a nearby source(s) or if some might come from further afield. It is not known if any water-worn beach cobbles were used. The association between natural and human-made marks would also merit further study.

#### 4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Monuments of similar date and type in State Guardianship include **Maeshowe**, **Cuween** and **Widford** chambered cairns on Mainland Orkney. Other nearby settlement sites of similar date in Guardianship are **Knap of Howar**, Papa Westray and **Links of Noltdland**, Westray.

Also see Holm of Papa Westray North chambered tomb,<sup>46</sup> and Point of Cott chambered tomb on Westray<sup>47</sup>, both of which have been excavated and published.

#### 5. KEYWORDS

Holm of Papa Westray South, Orkney, Neolithic, Chambered cairn, Maeshowe-type, Neolithic art, Captain F. W. L. Thomas (also known as Lieutenant F. W. L. Thomas), Eyebrow motif.

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<sup>46</sup> Ritchie 2009

<sup>47</sup> Barber 1997



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## Further Resources

Canmore ID: 3242  
Site Number: HY55SW 1  
NGR: HY 5091 5183

Scheduled Monument Description:

<http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90163>

An interactive 3D model of the site is available to explore at:  
<https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/holm-of-papa-westray-south-chambered-cairn-cb8ed6f9a467461292f3cfcf1ee1ce93>

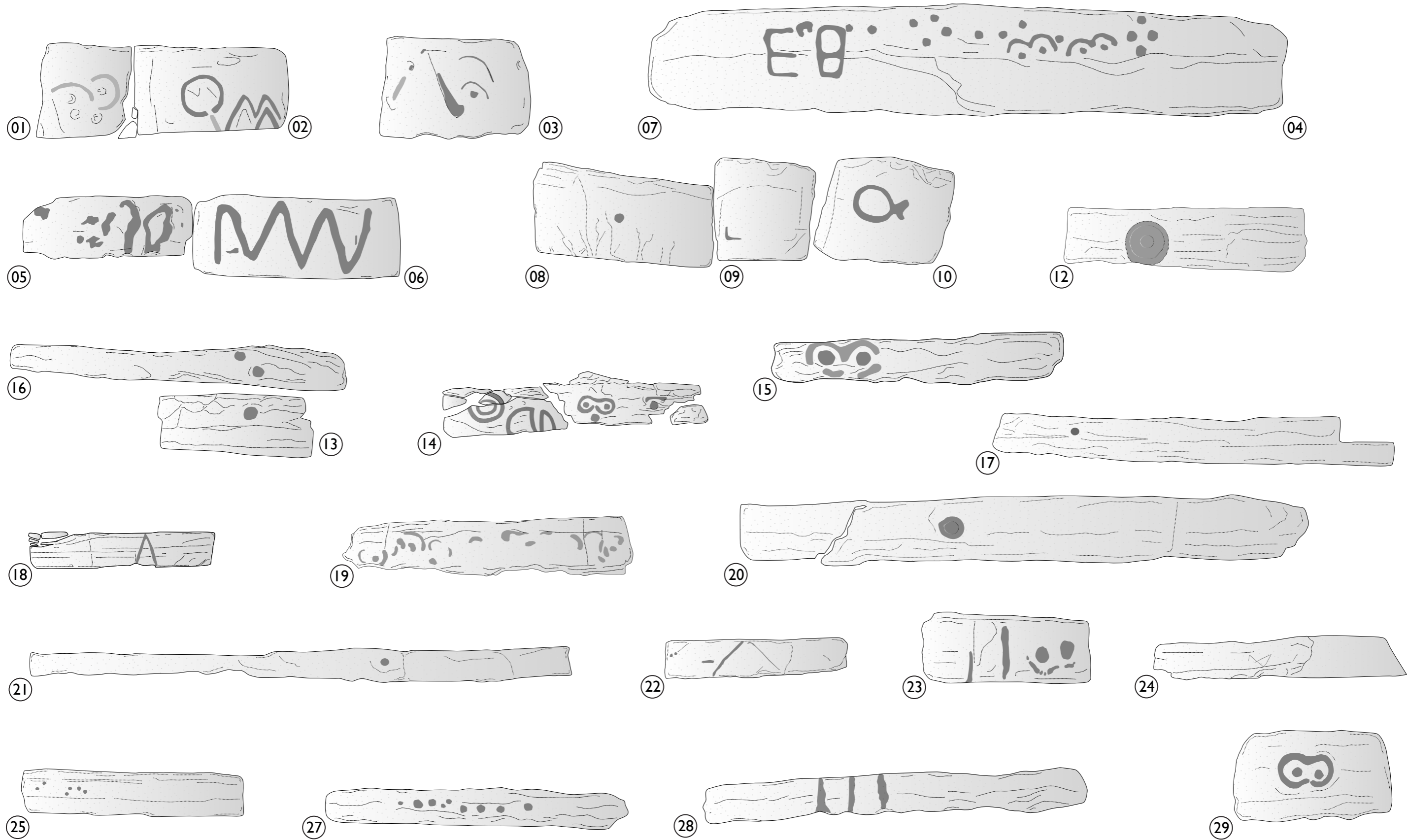
The 'Working Stone' project examined prehistoric stone tools from sites across Orkney, and provides a useful overview of the broader context in which Holm of Papa Westray South sits. Accessible at:

[www.orkneystonetools.org.uk/](http://www.orkneystonetools.org.uk/)

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- 1849** Site investigated by Captain F. W. L. Thomas, and left open to the elements
- 1857** Sketches of decorated interior stonework by George Petrie (e.g. Figure 7, above)
- 1872** By the time of Joseph Anderson visit the site was “much dilapidated”.
- 1925** Described by Hugh Marwick as being “in a deplorable state of collapse”
- 1929** Site originally scheduled, but documents later found to be incomplete.
- 1930** Enters State Guardianship
- 1931** Consolidation works and preparation for public display, including construction of sky-lit concrete roof.
- 1996** Formally scheduled as Holm of Papa Westray South, chambered cairn (SM90163)



Nos. 11 & 26 not illustrated



## APPENDIX 2: DECORATED INTERIOR STONEWORK

Interpretation drawings of decorated interior stonework.  
From Thomas 2019, p20. Reproduced with kind permission.