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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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Property in Care (PIC) ID:

PIC305

Designations:

Scheduled Monument (SM90209)

Taken into State care:

1910 (Guardianship)

Last Reviewed:

2015 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

MAESHOWE, CHAMBERED CAIRN



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

MAESHOWE, CHAMBERED CAIRN

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PART A: HEART OF NEOLITHIC ORKNEY WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Introduction

In 1999 the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (HONO WHS) was inscribed on the world heritage list. To be inscribed, a site must meet at least one of the criteria for the assessment of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) as defined by UNESCO.¹ A fuller exposition of the OUV of the site is given in the HONO WHS Management Plan 2014 – 2019.

This brief introduction sets Maeshowe in the context of HONO WHS and outlines the justification for Inscription on the World Heritage List. It also draws out some of the contemporary social and economic values which are relevant to the whole grouping of monuments that make up HONO WHS. The Historic Scotland Assessment of Significance for Maeshowe which follows at Part B, while recognising the monument as an integral part of this wider landscape and cultural ensemble, focusses in on Maeshowe itself for a closer examination of its range of heritage values.

Maeshowe within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS

Maeshowe, a large chambered cairn, is one of four main sites that comprise the WHS. The others are the sophisticated Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae, and the two major ceremonial sites at Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness with other associated monuments. The boundaries of the designated WHS are tightly drawn and coincide with those of the Properties in Care managed by HS. Other sites in the immediate vicinity such as Barnhouse Stone and the Ness of Brodgar contribute greatly to our understanding of the WHS and support its OUV but do not form part of the WHS as inscribed. The relationships between the main sites and the wider physical landscape forms part of the OUV of the WHS. The central west Mainland sites are visually linked to one another and were deliberately situated in the landscape, lying in a vast topographic bowl formed by a series of visually interconnecting ridgelines. These relationships are critical to understanding the monuments and the intentions of their builders.

They are also visually linked to other contemporary and later monuments around the lochs, and form a fundamental part of a wider, highly complex archaeological landscape which stretches over much of Orkney.

Together, Skara Brae, the Stones of Stenness, Maeshowe, the Ring of Brodgar and the monuments associated with them demonstrate with

¹ The process and language of Inscription is quite technical and the Criteria are modified from time to time. This means that the documentation prepared at time of Inscription may not match exactly the most up to date versions of the Criteria, or WHS guidance.

exceptional completeness the domestic, ceremonial and burial practices of a now vanished 5000-year old culture.

The justification for Inscription of the HONO WHS against OUV criteria²

- **Criterion (i):** *represent a masterpiece of human creative genius:* The major monuments of the Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar, the chambered tomb of Maeshowe, and the settlement of Skara Brae display the highest sophistication in architectural accomplishment; they are technologically ingenious and monumental masterpieces.
- **Criterion (ii):** *exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design:* The Heart of Neolithic Orkney exhibits an important interchange of human values during the development of the architecture of major ceremonial complexes in the British Isles, Ireland and north-west Europe
- **Criterion (iii):** *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared:* Through the combination of ceremonial, funerary and domestic sites, the Heart of Neolithic Orkney bears a unique testimony to a cultural tradition which flourished between about 3000 BC and 2000 BC. The state of preservation of Skara Brae is without parallel amongst Neolithic settlement sites in northern Europe.
- **Criterion (iv):** *be an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history:* The Heart of Neolithic Orkney is an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble and archaeological landscape which illustrate a significant stage of human history, that is, when the first large ceremonial monuments were built.

Tests of Authenticity and Integrity

As well as satisfying the OUV criteria, WHS must also meet standards of integrity and authenticity, explained in the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value.³ All the monuments lie within the designated boundaries of the WHS, and thus the Site includes all the elements necessary to

² See Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site: Statement of Outstanding Universal Value, Adopted by UNESCO World Heritage Committee Thirty-seventh session, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, June 2013.

³ See HONO WHS Management Plan 2014 – 19 p 65.

express its OUV. A buffer zone encompasses the wider landscape setting of the monuments which provides their essential context, and other monuments that can be seen to support the OUV. The authenticity of the site is assessed as high with an exceptional state of preservation. The long history of antiquarian interest in the sites means that the various components have been well recorded over a long time period and therefore there is evidence for many of the later interventions to the site. Antiquarian views of the monuments attest to their prior appearance, and it is clear that they remain largely in-situ.

Other values (including contemporary, social and economic values) of the HONO WHS.

The HONO WHS has a range of values which are not necessarily related to its world heritage value, but have national, regional and local significance and contribute to the public benefit of the site.⁴ These values include:

- Social (Community and identity; Artistic and literary; Spiritual; Recreation and access)
- Economic
- Education and learning
- Natural Heritage and Landscape (Nature conservation and biodiversity; Landscape)
- Research potential (see 2005 HONO WHS Research Agenda and 2013-18 HONO WHS Research Strategy)

These values, as they particularly apply to Maeshowe are addressed in the discussed in more detail in Part B of this document.

PART B: STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

I. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Maeshowe is a late-Neolithic chambered tomb that is part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (HONO WHS). The WHS designation at Maeshowe is c. 1Ha in area. It comprises a large turf-covered mound set on a circular platform surrounded by a wide flat-bottomed ditch and an outer bank. The chambered tomb comprises a long entrance passage on

⁴ See HONO WHS Management Plan 2008 – 13, p 17ff.

the southwest side leading to a massive central chamber, with entrances to smaller cells on each of the other three walls. Radiocarbon dates tentatively suggest that the tomb was constructed around 2700 BC along with the platform, wide ditch and outer bank all being broadly contemporary and thought to be part of the same construction phase.⁵ The passage into the central chamber is orientated towards the hills of Hoy and the setting of the sun on the Midwinter Solstice.

The monument is also known for its exceptional collection of later Norse runic inscriptions, with over 33 inscriptions and at least 8 sketches or motifs including the famous 'Maeshowe Dragon' or lion.

Visitors can only visit the tomb on a steward-guided tour. They enter the tomb through its original (partially reconstructed) long and low entrance. The inside is lit by electric lights. The outer bank is encircled by a modern fence defining the guardianship area.

The visitor centre is in Tormiston Mill, across the A965, the main road between Stromness and Kirkwall on which traffic can be busy and fast. At present there is very limited parking. A new infrastructure improvement project is in the early phases of planning which would provide improved visitor access including new, relocated, parking facilities and ticket office. There is a regular bus service. The visitor centre has a small exhibition, shop space and toilets.

There were 23,745 visits in 2013/14.

1.2 Statement of Significance

Maeshowe is internationally recognised as a key feature within the UNESCO-inscribed HONO WHS. The 2014-19 Management Plan states:

Maeshowe, a chambered tomb, is an extraordinary example of Neolithic architectural genius. It was designed to allow the setting sun at the winter solstice to shine up the passageway and illuminate the chamber. The Barnhouse Stone to the south is aligned with the passageway and the winter sunset.⁶

Maeshowe is one of the finest and most complete examples of a chambered tomb in north-west Europe. It is certainly the most elaborate known example in Scotland, is exceptionally well-preserved and displays a high level of technical skill and sophistication. The alignment of the monument suggests that the community who built this monument held ceremonies, rituals or beliefs that focused upon key points within the solar calendar such as Midwinter. This almost mystical aspect is one which appeals widely to people today and remains a source of wonder and

⁵ Renfrew, 1979.

⁶ Historic Scotland 2014, 6.

connection celebrated by attendance at the monument or viewed via live webcam. The scale and quality of the architecture, and the completeness of such an ancient site make Maeshowe a key visitor attraction on Orkney; the special aesthetic, even spiritual, experience of the Midwinter sunset from within the tomb is also a big draw.

Maeshowe is also important for its group value within the wider archaeological landscape of Orkney. The impressive mound remains a dominant feature in the surrounding rural landscape and forms part of an incredibly rich and well-preserved prehistoric landscape of international importance. It has strong interrelationships with many other important and well-preserved early prehistoric monuments in Orkney, several of which seem to have been deliberately sited in relationship to it. Maeshowe contributes towards our understanding of the development of major ceremonial complexes during the later Neolithic in Britain; parallels have been drawn between this complex of Neolithic monuments and other ritual landscapes such as Salisbury Plain in England and Brú na Bóinne in Ireland.

It has exceptional potential to inform our understanding of many aspects of Neolithic society in Orkney. Through similarities in its design and form, and its physical inter-relationship with settlements such as Barnhouse and Skara Brae it exemplifies the close link between so-called domestic and ritual aspects of daily life.

As well as its important evidence of Neolithic culture, Maeshowe is also of international importance in relation to understanding Norse culture. Inscribed onto the walls of the main chamber is the largest collection of runic inscriptions that survive outside of Scandinavia. The assemblage is of international significance for its nature and content and ability to demonstrate Norse culture.

In more regional terms, Maeshowe has become a type-site for Neolithic tombs in Orkney of a similar form, with an entrance passage, a large central chamber and symmetrically arranged side chambers or cells. However, the relevance of the classic categorisation is a topic of great debate.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

Maeshowe is a chambered tomb, or passage grave, dating to the late Neolithic. While we do not have precise dates or phases of construction for the monument, archaeological investigations from 1950s onwards, in particular Richards' work in 1991 (published 2005),⁷ have helped us to better understand the nature of the monument and its constructional

⁷ Richards, 2005

history. However, it is likely that the monument has had a long history of modification throughout prehistory, the nuances of which remain unknown.

The monument consists of a grass-covered mound measuring approximately 35m in diameter and 7m high, which sits on a levelled oval platform enclosed within a wide ditch and outer bank. The entire enclosure measures about 80m north-south by 70m east-west. The mound, which consists of earth, clay and stone revetment walls, covers the stone architecture of the chambered tomb and passage beneath.⁸ The present form of the outer bank dates to the Norse period, though excavations have demonstrated that the original phase of construction was probably contemporary with the tomb and it may have had a stone edging or low stone wall on top during prehistory.⁹

On the southwest side there is a long entrance-passage measuring c. 15m in length and up to 1.4m high that leads to the main chamber, about 4.7m square by 4.5m high (it may originally have been higher). The passage consists of an inner and outer section, with door jambs part-way along. The outer section of the passage was found in a ruinous state by the excavators in 1861 and appears to have been reconstructed following Farrer's investigations, leading to the present floor levels being slightly higher.¹⁰ Inside the door jambs is a triangular recess, shown clearly in drawings in 1861; it is now filled with a large blocking stone, recorded by Farrer as lying in the passage at the time of excavation.¹¹ The passage leads to the central chamber, which has four massive sandstone standing stones in each of the corners, each encased in a pier or corner-block of smaller stones, and a corbelled roof. Three elevated side chambers or cells lead off from the central chamber. The original Neolithic masonry survives up to at least 4m high internally; the upper part now comprises a stone roof built in the 1860s and above this (invisible to view) a concrete 'raft' added in the early 20th century.

Early Neolithic

Evidence suggests there was activity at the site from the early Neolithic, as excavations in 1991 revealed the presence of an earlier structure on the site below the artificial platform on the south side of the mound, close to the entrance. The structure appears to have been a drain, possibly forming part of a house.¹² Excavations at Howe, near Stromness, revealed a similar sequence with an earlier structure sealed beneath the passage grave and

⁸ The present profile of the mound differs from its original appearance; earlier descriptions and drawings suggest the mound was taller and conical in shape, with a depression on top (Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 142, 145). See also description by Stuart and drawing by Gibb (Stuart, 1865, 249, Plate XVI).

⁹ Richards, 2005, pp. 233-5; Renfrew, 1979, pp. 33-6; Childe, 1955, p. 159; Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 143.

¹⁰ Davidson and Henshall, 1989, pp. 143, 145-6.

¹¹ Stuart, 1865, p. 250; Davidson and Henshall, 1989, pp. 143-5.

¹² Richards, 2005.

the entrance of the earlier structure seems to have influenced the orientation of the later passage grave.¹³

Late Neolithic

The mound, chamber and surrounding bank and ditch were probably all built around 2700 BC.¹⁴ The earlier structure was demolished or abandoned at some point and the glacial knoll on which it stood was levelled and enhanced, using clay from the Loch of Harray to create the oval platform we see today. It is likely that the enclosing outer bank and wide ditch were also constructed at this time.¹⁵ The primary phase of tomb construction would have been the four large uprights, or standing stones, which form the corners of the central chamber. The positioning of these four stones may have assisted with the alignment of the entrance passage. The chamber walls and roof were then built up around the standing stones, followed by revetment walls and the covering mound of earth, stone and clay – with earth from the ditch presumably used to create the covering mound.

Richards' excavations located an earlier socket for a standing stone to the rear of the mound, which was subsequently removed.¹⁶ The socket was notably deep and would have supported a particularly large monolith. It is possible that this stone may have formed part of an earlier stone circle (along with the other large monoliths used for the construction of the central chamber and passage), though if this is the case they would not have been exposed to the elements for very long, as they show few signs of weathering).

Alternatively it may have stood as a single massive monolith contemporary with and adjacent to the mound – both have parallels at other passage grave sites.¹⁷

9th Century AD

Excavations by Childe in the 1950's discovered a long cist on the lower east edge of the mound which may be early historic or early Viking in date.¹⁸ The runic inscriptions referring to treasure being taken from the tomb have led to suggestions that it may have been reused during early Norse occupation in Orkney. This may also explain the scarcity of Neolithic finds

¹³ Ballin Smith, 1994.

¹⁴ Based on limited excavations by Renfrew undertaken in 1973-4, see Appendix 2 for details (Renfrew, 1979, pp. 31-8).

¹⁵ The present form of the bank is different to what would have existed during the late Neolithic. Based on evidence from excavations, Richards suggests it may originally have comprised an enclosing stone wall rather than the earthen bank we see today (Richards, 2005, pp. 232-5, 247).

¹⁶ Richards, 2005, pp. 242-4.

¹⁷ Excavations at Howe revealed evidence for a standing stone adjacent to the chambered tomb, and Newgrange and the Clava Cairns have evidence for stone circles prior to the construction of the passage-grave (Richards, 2005, pp. 243).

¹⁸ Childe, 1955, p. 167.

and human remains from within the cells, if they had been cleared out for later burials.

Evidence suggests that the outer bank was altered and strengthened in 9th century, suggesting a need to demarcate this site and separate it from the landscape.¹⁹ Some have suggested Maeshowe as a possible location for an *althing*;²⁰ the adoption of prehistoric burial mounds or similar archaeological sites for things can be seen elsewhere in Scandinavia and Britain,²¹ this hypothesis can further be supported by linguistic evidence, the striking form and location of Maeshowe and evidence to suggest the site was altered/maintained during Norse occupation.²²

12th and 13th Centuries

The large collection of runes (at least 33 inscriptions, including twig runes and at least 8 sketches or motifs) date to the middle of the 12th century. Norsemen under Harald Maddadarson (Orkneyinga Saga) broke into the tomb, via the top of the mound, in 1153 AD. A group of crusaders under the leadership of Earl Rognvald Kali also occupied the tomb, possibly between 1150-1.²³

19th and 20th Centuries

The first investigations into the tomb were carried out by antiquarian James Farrer in 1861.²⁴ He opened the tomb via the top of the mound, breaking through the corbelled roof. The discovery of the tomb excited enormous international antiquarian interest, particularly regarding the Norse inscriptions. Farrer's investigations resulted in damage and alteration to the outer passage, beyond the door jambs. This section was reconstructed and altered and the original alignment and floor levels may have been lost. Petrie's observations and Gibb's drawings are different to what we see today: the passage may have originally been longer and narrower; the lintels around the door jamb and the roof and floor of the

¹⁹ Renfrew, 1979, p. 37 and Gibbon, 2012, p.90.

²⁰ An *althing* or *thing* was a Norse governing assembly, where free men met to decide on legislation and dispense justice. These assemblies were an important social event in the calendar and people attending would set up temporary camps around the thing. Things were typically held at specially-designated places – it is possible that the prominent mound of Maeshowe, within its natural amphitheatre, provided an ideal setting for such an assembly (See O. Owen, 2012 p. 7-29 for a useful introduction).

²¹ See Owen 'Things in the Viking World' for examples (Owen, 2012, pp. 22-29).

²² Gibbon, 2012, pp. 89-90.

²³ Whilst the runes have all stylistically been dated to the mid-12th century, they were inscribed by different individuals and potentially on a number of different occasions. The exact sequence of events which led to the inscriptions at Maeshowe has been a subject of much debate, depending upon different interpretations of the runes. Clouston in 1933 attempted to determine a rigorous chronology and concludes that the tomb was entered and occupied on three separate occasions, though his theory is not widely accepted (Barnes, 1993).

²⁴ Petrie, 1861 and; Stuart, 1865.

outer passage have been reconstructed.²⁵ Following Farrer's investigations the tomb was resealed by the landowner, with a reconstructed corbelled structure. The upper parts of the corner piers may have been repaired at this time also.²⁶

Owing to its importance, Maeshowe was one of the first monuments in the British Isles to be afforded protection under the Ancient Monuments Protection Act in 1882. It passed into state care in 1910 and underwent conservation work including the insertion of a concrete roof over the top of the earlier Victorian reconstruction and the rounding of the mound to its present 'pudding-basin' profile. Since coming into care the monument has seen a continuing programme of maintenance, largely comprising minor repairs such as rewiring of the lighting within the tomb. Parts of the monument were excavated by Richards in 1991 ahead of the laying of a new pathway, repair of rabbit damage, and the installation of a new drainage system.

During the Second World War an army camp was established at Tormiston, adjacent to Maeshowe, the construction of which destroyed several prehistoric (probably Bronze Age) burial mounds.²⁷

The mound has an on-going issue with water ingress through the roof of the tomb and there are questions around how moisture levels may affect the long-term stability of the tomb interior, in particular the Neolithic and Norse carvings. However, comparison of scans has been undertaken for Maeshowe and at present these show no deterioration between tranches of recording.

Exploratory work was undertaken in 2005-6 to investigate the nature and extent of the early-20th century roof ahead of relaying a bitumen upper surface and waterproof membrane around the edges, and the reinstatement of a drain around the edge of the concrete raft.²⁸

British Empire connections

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire²⁹ has highlighted that Maeshowe has 'property' empire connection³⁰ as it was owned by the Balfours of Trenabie. The Balfours of Trenabie obtained significant wealth, and

²⁵ Davidson and Henshall, 1989, pp. 143-6; Petrie, 1861, p. 354; Richards, 2005, p. 242.

²⁶ Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 146; Petrie, 1861, p. 358.

²⁷ Grieve and Gibson, 2005, p. 79.

²⁸ Murray and Hollinrake, 2006, p. 126.

²⁹ Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.hes.scot.nhs.uk/properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire/c.1600-1997/historicenvironment.scot/)

³⁰ 'Property' connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recent enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

subsequently land, through the involvement of John Balfour (1750-1842) with the East India Company. On his return to Britain in 1790 he is thought to have doubled the already extensive fortune he had made while in the Company's service in southern India. On his death, the bulk of his £180,852 fortune passed to his great-nephew David Balfour (1811-87), who invested heavily in agricultural improvements on his estates. From the 1870s, the estates became divided between different members of the family. However, there can be no doubting that the passing on of the empire-derived wealth did play a role in preserving Orkney's ancient heritage. David Balfour took a direct interest in Maeshowe, and there is a strong case for arguing its early preservation is due to the investment of empire-derived wealth.³¹

2.2 Evidential values

The only evidence we have for prehistoric society and culture comes from the physical remains that survive, our understanding is based solely on interpretations of these physical remains. As a well-preserved upstanding site Maeshowe is therefore incredibly significant in terms of the evidence it can offer about prehistoric society. Evidence for Neolithic and Bronze Age society across much of Scotland is often limited solely to the physical remains of ritual and funerary monuments. The significance of Maeshowe is therefore further enhanced as it forms part of a well-preserved prehistoric landscape and has a close relationship with many other monuments including broadly contemporary settlement sites within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS and buffer zone. The scale and sophistication of Maeshowe indicates a structured society with complex belief systems and great technical ability. The monument has considerable intrinsic value for its potential to contribute to our understanding and interpretation of Neolithic society, and ritual and funerary monuments.

Despite Farrer's investigations, which led to clearance of the tomb and minor alterations to the form of the monument, and the disturbance in the 12th century, the overall completeness and the condition in which it survives is outstanding. Most modern excavation has been limited to denuded parts of the ditch and bank, or the surrounding platform; there has been no extensive excavation of the site and the mound itself remains largely undisturbed.³² Maeshowe retains considerable research potential through future archaeological investigation.

Excavations by Childe and Richards have demonstrated the monument's high archaeological potential; their excavations in 1954-5 and 1991

³¹ Mullen *et al* 2024, 46-48.

³² As evidenced by excavations in 2005-6 within the fabric of the mound which demonstrated that Childe did not fully excavate all of the deposits he encountered and that significant archaeological deposits survive within the mound, even in areas previously investigated.

respectively have greatly enhanced our understanding of the form and constructional history of the monument.³³ Much of the surrounding platform and ditch remains unexplored, as do sections of the mound, and it is in these areas that we can expect to find important archaeological deposits. The ditch and platform are likely to preserve further environmental information and potential for refining the chronology.

Richards' excavations revealed traces for earlier activity on the site – these results, combined with geophysical survey, suggests that there is considerable archaeological potential around and beneath the mound, which could greatly add to our understanding of earlier activity at the site and the origin and development of the monument. There is potential for hearths and pits or other features and deposits relating to the use of the monument within the surrounding platform. Furthermore, Childe's excavations indicated the potential for the mound and surrounding area to reveal evidence for later uses of the site.³⁴

The outstanding condition and completeness of Maeshowe mean that it can tell us a great deal about many aspects of Neolithic society, including technical ability, astronomy, religion and beliefs, and the significance placed on the physical landscape. It offers the rare potential to study and appreciate one of the finest examples of Neolithic architecture in northwest Europe and to compare it with contemporary sites in Orkney and similar monuments further afield such as the passage grave at Newgrange. It is also possible to understand the monument in its dramatic landscape setting and to observe and study its physical relationship with both natural features and contemporary monuments in the surrounding landscape.

Maeshowe is one of few prehistoric ritual monuments to demonstrate particularly good evidence for a deliberate astronomical alignment. The passage of Maeshowe is aligned with the setting of the midwinter sun behind the hills of Hoy.³⁵ Each year at and for almost three weeks on either side of midwinter, the rays of the setting sun shine along the passage and on the midwinter solstice itself move across the rear wall of the main chamber. This phenomenon can still be witnessed and appreciated today.

³³ Childe, 1955 and Richards, 2005.

³⁴ Excavations in the south-east side of the mound revealed evidence for a long cist, inserted into the mound at a later date (Childe, 1955, pp. 167-8).

³⁵ Mackie carried out investigations into the alignments at Maeshowe in 1997. He concluded the use of foresights such as the Barnhouse Stone and the summit of Ward Hill on Hoy indicate that Maeshowe was undoubtedly deliberately situated on an alignment with the midwinter sunset. However, the passage is not *centrally* aligned with the setting sun and would not have been in the past, we cannot therefore be sure that illumination of the main chamber was the purpose of this alignment. Maeshowe may also have been situated to align with other important dates in the solar calendar around midwinter and would have been a way to determine these dates. Mackie also cautions that modern restorations and alterations to the outer passage in the late 19th century will have affected our understanding and ability to determine the original alignment and its meaning (Mackie, 1997).

Discussion of how this alignment is illustrative of the function of Maeshowe and of Neolithic belief systems is picked up in the Historical Values section below.

Maeshowe is one of an increasing number of Neolithic sites where Neolithic art has been discovered. As with many aspects of Maeshowe, the degree of survival and extent of the motifs is greater here than at other sites in Orkney.³⁶ The scratch-art was first noted by Farrer, though Ashmore was the first to recognise them as Neolithic and drew comparisons with similar markings at Skara Brae.³⁷ Peck-dressings occur on the lintel and jambstones inside the entrance to the main chamber and around the entrances to each of the cells.³⁸ The survival of peck-dressings inside Maeshowe offers an important corpus of evidence, which can be compared with other sites across Scotland and further afield. The meaning and significance of Neolithic art is much debated and studies are very much in their infancy; Maeshowe offers considerable potential for further study. It also has the potential to inform us of the way space was used and experienced during the Neolithic and the relationships between ritual and domestic spaces.³⁹

While Maeshowe can tell us much about Neolithic society and belief systems it has yielded very little physical evidence for its original use or for treatment of the dead. The chambers were cleared of 'rubbish' during Farrer's excavations in 1861, though they had suffered disturbance and possible clearance prior to this in the 12th and possibly 9th centuries.⁴⁰ There are no recorded artefacts found at the site and the only references to human remains being found at the time of initial excavation are by Petrie who notes a single fragment of human skull was found⁴¹ and Marwick who states there were several.⁴² This suggests that a number of human skulls may have been placed inside the passage grave during its use, however, the small quantity of human remains recorded overall suggests that it did not function as a tomb for a Neolithic community. This is a similar picture to many, but not all,⁴³ Maeshowe-type tombs, Davidson and Henshall note how these tombs have typically produced very little or no human remains

³⁶ Bradley, Phillips, Richards, and Webb, 2000, p. 57.

³⁷ Farrer, 1862; Ashmore, 1987. Tim Phillips and Richard Bradley were the first to systematically survey and record the 'pick-dressings' within Maeshowe and a number of others sites in Orkney (Phillips and Bradley, 2000; Bradley, Phillips, Richards, and Webb, 2000).

³⁸ Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 145; Phillips and Bradley, 2000, p. 103.

³⁹ Bradley, Phillips, Richards, and Webb, 2000.

⁴⁰ Stuart, 1865.

⁴¹ Petrie, 1861, p. 356.

⁴² Marwick, 1931, pp. 12-13.

⁴³ Quanterness and Cuween are just two examples of Maeshowe-type tombs where human remains have been found.

and that in general these tombs produce very little evidence relating to their original use.⁴⁴

The tomb also displays the largest single collection of runic inscriptions outside Scandinavia. Carved onto the walls of the main chamber are 30 or so runic inscriptions, and a number of sketches or motifs. These inscriptions contribute significantly to an understanding of Norse society and culture, the Norse presence in northern Scotland, and the nature and extent of runic culture. The carvings offer great potential to study orthography and etymology and have been widely discussed since their initial discovery.

2.3 Historical values

Associative

The runic inscriptions at Maeshowe are not only significant for their cultural value, but they can be related to individuals and historic events described in the Orkneyinga saga. The saga tells us how Harald Maddarson attacked Orkney in January 1153.⁴⁵ He landed at Stromness and began to march towards Firth but he and his men were forced to shelter at Orkahaug (Maeshowe) during a snow storm. The runes suggest the tomb was broken into at an earlier date by Norse crusaders, gathered in Orkney under Earl Rognvald Kali, whom the last quarter of the saga focuses upon. The runes also reference the axe owned by Gauk Trandil's son, a weapon owned by one of the chiefs named in Njal's Saga, demonstrating the inscriber's knowledge of Norse history and tradition. At the time of their discovery the runes generated a huge amount of interest from scholars across northern Europe during the mid- to late 19th century and led to, occasionally heated, debates about their origins, meaning and accurate translations.⁴⁶

There are strong links with local myth and folklore associated with Maeshowe. Orcadian folklore tells of many different supernatural creatures who built or occupied mounds like Maeshowe. Stuart, writing in 1865 notes that 'Maeshowe is believed to have been tenanted by a goblin inhabitant of great strength, popularly known as the Hoghoy (perhaps corrupted; as Mr Farrer suggests, from Haugbuie, which in Norse means "The Ghost of the Tomb"); and that both Professor Philips and Mr Bateman, in describing sepulchral mounds in Yorkshire and Derbyshire, inform us that there also some of these are reputed to be the abode of an unearthly or supernatural being.'⁴⁷ These folkloric associations could perhaps have an element of truth and may add to arguments that the site was reused during the Norse

⁴⁴ Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 57; 80.

⁴⁵ 'Earl Harald set out for Orkney at Christmas with four ships and a hundred men... on the thirteenth day of Christmas they travelled on foot over to Firth. During a snow-storm they took shelter in Maeshowe and there two of them went insane...' Chapter 93: Orkneyinga Saga (Palsson and Edwards, 1981).

⁴⁶ Barnes, 1993.

⁴⁷ Stuart, 1865, pp. 255-6.

period as a place of burial. In pre-Christian Norse society the head of the family, or founding father, was often buried within a large mound on or close to the farmstead as it was believed that the individual's spirit lived on and protected over the farm after death.

Illustrative

The tomb itself is illustrative of the skill and knowledge of Neolithic society. The scale and sophistication of the monument are such that construction would have required both a huge amount of labour and considerable technical ability, as well as knowledge of solar alignments. This has huge implications for the nature of Neolithic society in Orkney and attests to the social significance of the monument. It is also illustrative of Neolithic society's belief systems and world views through its architectural form, alignment with the midwinter sunset, and association with other monuments in the landscape. The monumentality of the site is illustrative of an emerging social hierarchy, as evidence elsewhere across Britain around this time, which presents itself through a rise in architecture relating to ceremony and ritual. These emerging ideas and new architectural forms are part of a wider cultural process which spread across the British Isles during the Neolithic, and sites in Orkney, such as Maeshowe, which are associated with the use of Grooved Ware, appear to have been at the centre of these developments. The monument thus illustrates Orkney's significant role in the origin and spread of these new ideas and Orkney's links across northern Europe during the Neolithic.

The runic inscriptions offer a very rare human insight into the monument and its history. They are illustrative of Norse/Viking society, their attitudes, humour, and their knowledge of folklore and myth. Maeshowe's name is also illustrative of its Norse associations, though the exact etymology of the name is debated, 'howe' is of Scandinavian origin, a name typically given to mounds/knolls such as this.

The tomb's alignment with the setting of the midwinter sun, and the degree of planning that would have gone into this, tells us something about the significance of this annual event for the community that constructed the monument. Midwinter would undoubtedly have been a significant point in the calendar for many early farming communities, marking the shortest day of the year. Other broadly contemporary monuments have similar associations with significant solar calendar dates: Newgrange for example is aligned with midwinter sunrise. It has been suggested that the setting of the midwinter sun marks the death of the previous year and the start of a new, or rebirth. The alignment at Maeshowe is perhaps illustrative of Neolithic society's beliefs relating to cycles of life and death and the afterlife. It also suggests there may have been ceremonial occasions, perhaps celebrated at Maeshowe, on significant dates (equinoxes and

‘Quarter Days’) within the solar calendar and one of the functions of the monument may have been to determine these dates.⁴⁸

Richards discusses how the elements of the tomb’s architecture symbolises its association with death. He suggests, for example, that the incorporation of standing stones into the structure is symbolic and indicative of ancestor worship.⁴⁹ These stones have no load-bearing or structural function, in fact their use introduces structural instability, which suggests they were built into the tomb for another reason. Prehistoric standing stones and stone circles are strongly associated with death and the ancestors, the use of standing stones in the construction of Maeshowe is therefore likely to have been deliberate and significant.

However, despite clearly having associations with the dead, only a single fragment of human skull was found here (now lost). This is consistent with a number of other Maeshowe-type tombs, and indeed other types of Neolithic tomb, and would imply that whilst these monuments have strong associations with the dead, they were not necessarily intended to be final resting places for the community. It is likely that they had other meanings or functions, perhaps as a symbolic shrine for the ancestors, or as a place of ceremony.

Given the completeness of Maeshowe, it is possible to explore the way in which it was experienced and used during prehistory. Investigations into the acoustic properties of Neolithic sites across Britain, including Maeshowe have demonstrated that the mound, stone chambers and a long narrow passages of tombs can create a range of acoustic effects, which may have been used to heighten the atmosphere or an create otherworldly feel during rituals or ceremonies that took place there.⁵⁰

Further evidence of the function and meaning of Maeshowe is offered by the numerous examples of Neolithic art incised on the interior walls. It is significant that such markings are found within both ritual and domestic settings, within Maeshowe-type tombs, at the complex at Ness of Brodgar, broadly contemporary settlement sites, and on Grooved Ware and other domestic objects, suggesting that use of such motifs within tombs emphasised the link between the community, the living and the dead.⁵¹ These motifs may also demonstrate the expression and development of community/social identities.⁵²

Maeshowe can offer us a great insight into Neolithic society, belief systems, ritual and important ceremonial dates. It is important for our understanding of the awareness and significance Neolithic people ascribed to the annual

⁴⁸ Mackie, 1997.

⁴⁹ Richards, 2005, pp. 246-7.

⁵⁰ Watson and Keating, 2000; Watson and Keating, 1999.

⁵¹ Bradley, Phillips, Richards, and Webb, 2000.

⁵² Bradley, Phillips, Richards, and Webb, 2000; Shepherd, 2000.

cycle of the sun and how their belief system physically permeated the landscape that they lived and worked in.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Maeshowe is the type-site for later Neolithic chambered tombs in Orkney of a similar form. Maeshowe-type tombs are generally rectangular in plan, with high roofs and low entrance passages leading to a main chamber with symmetrically arranged side cells or chambers, and generally covered by a round mound of earth.⁵³ These tombs are typically associated with Grooved Ware and can be dated to approximately 3000-2400 BC. However, Maeshowe is now recognised as an atypical member of the group. It has been described as representing ‘a culmination of chambered tomb design in the Scottish Neolithic’⁵⁴ and is certainly set apart from the many other chambered tombs found both in Orkney and across northwest Europe, being of a much grander scale.

The scale of its conception, the refinement of its design, and the quality of its masonry make Maeshowe one of the outstanding architectural achievements of prehistoric Western Europe. Upon completion the tomb would have been the ‘highest enclosed space ever experienced by Neolithic people’.⁵⁵ It is a masterpiece of Neolithic design and stonework construction (from its use and incorporation of massive individual stones to finer stonework) – a remarkable mix of simplicity of form and sophistication of construction. The tomb architecture is highly sophisticated, with its impressive height, flush vertical faces and straight lengths of walling. The monumentality of the stonework of Maeshowe is notable in comparison with the much smaller stone slabs used in the construction of other Maeshowe-type tombs in Orkney. This applies not just to the possible standing stones forming the passage and central chamber, which are exceptionally large, but most of the stonework is larger than that typically used.

Maeshowe displays a number of unusual and rare characteristics. Distinctive features of its design include: the use of standing stones in the construction of the central chamber and entrance passage,⁵⁶ the absence of a vertical wall-face to revet the outer edge of the mound,⁵⁷ passage blocking stone and recess built to hold it; widening and heightening of passage part way along to form ‘door-checks’; corner buttresses; and

⁵³ Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 37.

⁵⁴ Ballin Smith, 1994, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Richards, 2005, p. 245.

⁵⁶ Davidson and Henshall note that whilst the use of such megaliths within tombs is not unique, the nature in which they are used at Maeshowe is (Davidson and Henshall, 1989, p. 37).

⁵⁷ Though the Childe’s excavations did reveal low revetment walls within the mound (Childe, 1955).

rebating of building blocks. The blocking stones for each of the side chambers and use of single slabs used for each of the cell roofs, rather than beehive or corbelled vaulting is also rare. The use of megaliths (standing stones) in the construction of the main chamber is elaborate and adds instability to the structure by adding extra height to the roof of the chamber and thus necessitating a steeper covering mound.⁵⁸ The incorporation of these stones also explains the unusually high ceiling and the size of the mound. Other unusual features at Maeshowe include the artificial platform and surrounding enclosure with wide ditch and outer bank on which it stands.⁵⁹

The architecture and overall form of Maeshowe embodies many elements of the surrounding landscape, including some of the other contemporary monuments. The standing stones forming the central chamber echo those of Stenness and Brodgar, the enclosing ditch reflects the nearby henges and the profile of the mound resembles the many other natural mounds common to the Orkney landscape (though the profile of the mound may have been different during prehistory). These architectural features are likely to have been highly significant and symbolic and can therefore help us to understand their meaning, the function of the monument and Neolithic belief systems.

While Maeshowe reflects many elements of the surrounding landscape, the monument seems to have been made deliberately separate and set-apart. It is interesting to note for instance, that the enclosing ditch originally had no entrance or causeway, essentially creating an island separating the tomb and platform from the rest of the land. Excavations by Childe (1955) and Renfrew (1979) have also demonstrated that the ditch quickly fills with water, suggesting it may have contained water during prehistory. If this was the case it would have further emphasised the monument's liminality and inaccessibility.

The parallels between the architecture and megalithic art found at Maeshowe and Barnhouse is worth brief discussion here. The internal architecture of some late Neolithic houses is very similar to that of Neolithic tombs and this similarity of form has been noted across Orkney. Many comparisons have been drawn between the 'ceremonial' House 2 at Barnhouse and Maeshowe in terms of the sophistication of design and construction. Similar architecture is used to create recesses within the central chamber at Maeshowe and the recessed areas within House 2 for

⁵⁸ See Barber for further details and a discussion of the architecture of megalithic tombs (Barber, 1992). Barber also adds a cautionary warning that while such architecture can inform our understanding of prehistoric religious beliefs, it is likely that the same architectural forms were used and re-used in a variety of different ways, perhaps for different religious beliefs/rituals over a long period of time.

⁵⁹ The only other known example of an enclosure surrounding a chambered tomb in the same way is at Howe near Stromness (now destroyed). Indeed, the overall form of the second chambered tomb at Howe was probably very similar to Maeshowe (Ballin Smith, 1994, pp. 17, 24).

example, and the original form of this house would have had a very similar appearance to that of the central chamber at Maeshowe.⁶⁰ The Neolithic art at Maeshowe, comprising peck-dressings and lightly incised lines, chevrons, crosses and lozenges, is comparable with markings that found at Skara Brae, Ness of Brodgar and other sites across Orkney. The pick-dressings in particular are typically found around the entrances and at important thresholds within houses and tombs. These abstract geometric markings are part of a recognisable 'suite' of patterns and motifs found in passage-graves of the Boyne Valley in Ireland, and elsewhere across western Europe.⁶¹ The similarity of the form, technique used and context of these motifs is indicative of regional contacts.

The famous Maeshowe 'dragon' or lion motif carved by Norse visitors to the tomb is a fine example of late Viking Age northern art, which displays Romanesque and Scandinavian influences and stylistic traits.⁶² The motif is reminiscent of 11th century animal figures found on carved stones and metalwork found across Scandinavia. A similar creature can be seen in the carvings of the Tullstorp Stone from Sweden for instance.⁶³ Some stylistic elements of the motif appear to be earlier than the 12th century runes, though researchers suggest it is likely it was carved at the same time.⁶⁴ The free-sketches, motifs and runes within the tomb form part of a corpus of evidence for Norse inscriptions across both west and northern Scotland and Scandinavia.⁶⁵

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Maeshowe is an iconic part of Orkney's landscape and a key component of the internationally-renowned early prehistoric landscape that survives (in upstanding and below-ground form) in the Stenness/Brodgar area. It is one of a number of monuments on mainland Orkney that form part of The Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site. Its topographical, archaeological, perceptual and experiential relationships with the surrounding landscape and associated monuments are one of its defining and most significant aspects. Its location and setting is integral to understanding its function and of how Neolithic society viewed and understood the world around them.

⁶⁰ See Richards for details (2005, p. 245).

⁶¹ Shepherd, 2000, p. 149; Bradley, Phillips, Richards, and Webb, 2000.

⁶² Mackenzie discusses the stylistic influences and comparisons of this motif in detail in his article from 1937 (Mackenzie, 1937, pp. 157-173).

⁶³ Mackenzie, 1937, pp. 167-8.

⁶⁴ O'Meadhra, 1993, p. 432.

⁶⁵ See O'Meadhra for discussion of the significance of the Norse inscriptions of Maeshowe in comparison with other examples across Scotland and Scandinavia (O'Meadhra, 1993, pp. 423-440).

The tomb is situated within a natural amphitheatre, typical for ritual monuments. It is surrounded by a ring of hills on the horizon, most notably the hills of Hoy to the southwest, which are a prominent feature in the landscape and a significant factor in the alignment and orientation of Maeshowe and many other Neolithic monuments in this part of Orkney. The siting of Maeshowe was deliberate and very carefully chosen to focus upon the symbolic alignment of the setting of the midwinter sun over the hills of Hoy. Indeed, Mackie suggests that there is no other location on Mainland Orkney where such an alignment could have been possible.⁶⁶

Whilst other monuments within the WHS are placed in prominent positions, Maeshowe is somewhat hidden from views to the east and north due to rising ground. However, it is prominent in local views and the size of the impressive grassy mound is enhanced by the large platform on which it stands. The form of Maeshowe is reflective of the surrounding topography, its profile reminiscent of Ward Hill on Hoy and many of the natural knolls nearby.

One of the most significant aspects of Maeshowe's landscape setting is the monument's visual, physical and experiential relationships with other broadly contemporary monuments in the surrounding landscape. The richness and completeness of this prehistoric landscape further adds to the significance. The most significant example of this is the alignment with the Barnhouse Stone c. 800m to the south-southwest, which acts as a marker for alignment with the setting of the midwinter sun behind Ward Hill on Hoy. Other significant physical relationships are the alignments of the stone setting within the circle at Stones of Stenness, the entrance of structure 8 at Barnhouse, and the entrance of structure 10 at the Ness of Brodgar with Maeshowe. These interrelationships are a key part of understanding the function and meaning of the monument and the way prehistoric belief systems permeated the landscape.

The visual encirclement of the hills and the focus towards Hoy is an important aspect of both the prehistoric and modern experience of the monument. The skyline remains largely devoid of modern features, allowing visitors to have almost the same visual experience as past generations, perhaps more so than at comparable WHS sites such as Stonehenge or Newgrange. The present arrangement of access to Maeshowe by guided tour formalises and mediates visitor experiences, perhaps detracting from the isolated and other-worldly nature of the site. Organised tour groups and modern lighting diminish the contrast between light and dark as you enter/leave the tomb and the sense of stillness and isolation experienced within the main chamber.

⁶⁶ Mackie, 1997, p. 357.

2.6 Natural heritage values

To be added.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

There have been a number of postgraduate studies into contemporary experience and value of Orkney's monuments.⁶⁷

Tourism is one of the largest sources of income for the islands and the islands' archaeological sites such as Maeshowe are one of the biggest draws for visitors to Orkney.⁶⁸

Social and community values

As part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS Maeshowe holds special significance with a wide variety of communities, including local and academic. Many residents in Orkney take great pride and interest in the islands' rich heritage and archaeology, and monuments such as Maeshowe are part of the islands' sense of place and identity. However, while local residents are proud of this heritage and understand its significance, they also take these monuments for granted – they form part of the 'background'.

The social value of Maeshowe, along with the other monuments forming the WHS in Orkney has been explored in a study by McClanahan.⁶⁹ In her study, she describes the monuments as 'emblematic symbols of the Orkney landscape, history and culture. This is seen through artistic depictions of the monuments in a variety of media, their place in folklore and other traditions, and the ways in which Orkney residents verbally express feelings of 'ownership' of the monuments, for example, using the word 'ours' to describe them in interviews and during WHS consultation group meetings. The symbolic value of the monuments is also embedded in the notion that to have an 'authentic' Orkney experience, visitors are expected to visit some or all of the HONO monuments, just as one should visit the Pyramids of Giza if visiting Egypt.

Spiritual values

The alignment with the midwinter sunset and its symbolic associations with death imply belief in an afterlife and ancestor worship in Neolithic society in Orkney.

There is widespread international interest in the midwinter sunset at Maeshowe; the event is popular amongst many visitors including astronomers and archaeologists. Visitors comment on the mystical and

⁶⁷ McClanahan, 2004; Dye, 2009; Timoney, 2009.

⁶⁸ See McClanahan, 2004 for analysis of contemporary social values.

⁶⁹ McClanahan, 2004.

‘special’ feel to the site, especially once inside the main chamber, one interviewee in McClanahan’s study compared the architecture and the feeling of being inside the tomb with being in a church.⁷⁰

Economic

Tourism is hugely important to Orkney’s economy. Maeshowe is significant as a key visitor attraction, it is an iconic site and important component of the WHS. However, visitor numbers are limited by timed tours and the limited parking space available.

As part of the WHS, Maeshowe has contributed towards sustainable economic development in Orkney, increasing tourism around archaeology and supporting local businesses.

Access and education

As part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS, Maeshowe offers considerable research potential and the WHS draws significant academic interest. Since WHS designation a new research centre, ORCA (Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology) has been established. A research strategy for the WHS was launched in 2013: Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site: Research Strategy 2013-2018.⁷¹

A small stand-alone app is being developed to provide a virtual tour of Maeshowe for visitors who cannot go on a tour or access the inside. Initially this will be available only on a tablet at Tormiston Mill.

Corporate value

The site offers potential for HS to demonstrate best practice in conservation and management. The management of visitor numbers through timed tours with limited numbers, at a site with such space restrictions and delicate Norse and Neolithic carvings, is just one example of a sensitive approach, to ensure access without risk of damage to the monument.

HONO WHS is part of a small group of only 6 sites in Scotland that have international recognition through inscription on the World Heritage List. Management for each of these is delivered through the Site Management Plan that involves national and local partners, as well as other key stakeholders. The delivery of the Management Plan for the WHS is an excellent example of partnership working.

Potential to further HS and SG aims.

⁷⁰ McClanahan, 2004, p. 63.

⁷¹ Historic Scotland and University of Highlands and Islands: Orkney College, 2013.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

It is likely that the site of Maeshowe was used intermittently over millennia and that the monument we see today is a result of many different phases of use and alteration, the precise date and nature of these is yet to be determined. Relatively small sections of the mound, platform and surrounding bank and ditch have been archaeologically investigated to modern standards. There is considerable potential to obtain scientific dates and further information about the nature of earlier activity on the site and the surrounding area. Very little is known of the archaeology in the immediate vicinity of Maeshowe and its wider context.

Although Richards’⁷² work has gone some way to enhancing our understanding of the monument and its development, questions still remain regarding the sequences of construction, for example, was the construction of the ditch contemporary with construction of the tomb or does it relate to earlier structures on the site, or was it constructed alongside the tomb. Radiocarbon dates from the ditches provide us with a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the ditch, at a time when peat had started to accumulate, but do not tell us when it was first cut. However, it is important to note that there is no direct link between the cutting of the ditch and construction of the mound.⁷³ Richards’ excavations also tantalisingly revealed evidence for earlier structures and indicated high archaeological potential between the mound and ditch, though the precise nature of any earlier activity and exact sequencing of occupation and construction remains uncertain. For instance, was the large standing stone at the rear of the mound once part of a stone circle and was it contemporary with the mound, or earlier?

Though Maeshowe is a type-site for chambered tombs of a similar form, it is unquestionably different from the others. Some have argued that it represents an early example, with others in the group being of lower quality, while others argue that it represents the height of tomb construction.⁷⁴ There are many unanswered questions regarding the validity of this group classification and the relative chronology of Maeshowe-type chambered tombs.

We still know very little about the intended function of the monument, how it was used, why it was constructed, what role it played in society and who accessed or used the tomb. Despite being classed as a tomb, only one fragment of human bone was found at the site, and this is now lost. The original contents of the tomb are now lost; there must have been much disturbance in the 12th century when Norsemen broke into and occupied the tomb, and it may have been cleared out prior to this, perhaps in

⁷² Richards, 2005.

⁷³ Historic Scotland, 2005, pp. 53-4.

⁷⁴ Piggott, 1954, pp. 243-6; Henshall, 1963, pp. 123-4; Renfrew, 1979, pp. 201-3; Richards, 2005, pp. 231-2.

prehistory. Farrer's investigations in 1861 then removed anything that might have remained of the original contents. As such we have no artefactual evidence to indicate the nature of activity at the site and cannot be sure that it was ever used as a place of burial. It is possible that Maeshowe performed a different function to other tombs, perhaps as a form of temple. Archaeological investigations around the mound on the platform have helped to identify the nature of the platform and to determine the sequence of construction, but know little about the function – whether it was used for ritual or ceremonial activities etc. There is also much more to be learnt about the spatial and temporal relationships between Maeshowe and other sites in the WHS, and the wider astroarchaeological significance and ceremonial function of these sites, and comparable sites elsewhere.

There are gaps in our knowledge regarding the extent of later alterations, modifications and re-use. Excavations have revealed evidence for the insertion of a later cist into the side of the mound and repairs to the outer bank in the 9th century; we also have evidence to suggest the site may have been used for early Norse burial and as a meeting point or *althing*. However, this evidence remains fragmentary and the arguments speculative – we cannot be sure of the nature or extent of later use of the site.

The main modern study of the runes is linguistic. An updated wider appreciation of the significance of this collection of runes from a broader historical and sociological Scandinavian perspective is desirable.

As with some other Orkney monuments, there are various spellings of the site, a subject that can be of heated local interest. Maes Howe appears to be a recent spelling; OS uses Maeshowe and Barnes and Page, Scandinavian experts, confirm that this is the form that better conforms to the stress pattern of the pronunciation in Orkney.

One of the research aims identified in the HONO Research Strategy 2013-18⁷⁵ relates specifically to Maeshowe: to establish the hydrological status of Maeshowe and the long-term implications for its stability. Whilst investigations and conservation work took place in 2005-6, the moisture levels in the tomb are still a potential risk to the runes and Neolithic carvings within the tomb, as well as the monument's overall long term preservation.

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Maeshowe-type tombs: **Wideford, Cuween, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray South, Isbister** ('Tomb of the Eagles' open to the public but privately owned), **Vinquoy**;

⁷⁵ Historic Scotland and University of Highlands and Islands: Orkney College, 2013

Other Neolithic tombs at **Midhowe**, **Knowe of Yarso**, **Unstan**, **Blackhammer**, **Taversøe Tuick**.

Broadly contemporary Neolithic houses at **Skara Brae** and **Barnhouse**, also has architectural similarities and both display similar Neolithic art.

In broader sense it is associated with the other monuments in the Heart of Neolithic WHS and its surrounding area, most notably the **Barnhouse Stone** and **Stones of Stenness**, but also the **Ring of Brodgar** and the **Watchstone**. The nearby complex at the Ness of Brodgar is also part of this Neolithic landscape and has associations with Maeshowe, though it is not a PIC.

5. KEYWORDS

Neolithic, chambered tomb, passage grave, Maeshowe-type, corbelling, scratch-art, peck-marks, midwinter sunset, Barnhouse Stone, runic inscriptions, Norse carvings, Orkneyinga Saga, Gordon Childe.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- **3000 BC** The mound, chamber and surrounding bank and ditch were probably built around 3000 BC by people related to those who set up the Stones of Stenness and lived in settlements like those at Skara Brae and Barnhouse.
- **9th century AD** Excavations and radiocarbon dates from 1970's suggest that the enclosing bank was repaired or rebuilt during the 9th century – it is possible that the tomb was cleared out and re-used

at this time. This could explain the later 12th century references to treasure being found within the tomb.

- **12th-century** Norse runic inscriptions relate activities in the tomb to known historical figures and events as described in the Orkneyinga Saga.
- **17th century** Hibert⁷⁶ claims the mound was dug into by Cromwellian soldiers but that nothing was found.
- **1861** Farrer and other antiquarians open the tomb. Its discovery, including the Norse inscriptions, excites enormous international antiquarian interest.
- **1862** Farrer catalogues and numbers the runic inscriptions.⁷⁷ Mr Balfour, the owner, begins work to reinstate the collapsed roof of the tomb and installs a gate in the chamber entrance. The site is visited by Dr E Charlton who publishes an extensive account on his visit and interpretation of the runes.⁷⁸
- **1864** Stuart⁷⁹ not only describes the runes, but also gives scholarly consideration to the date, nature and history of the structure. He makes comparisons with Newgrange and concludes that Maeshowe was built for a much earlier Celtic chieftain than the runes would imply.
- **1882** One of the first monuments in the British Isles to be protected under the Ancient Monuments Protection Act.
- **1885** Visited by General Pitt-Rivers (notebooks in Public Records Office, PRO Work 39/15), in his capacity as Inspector of Ancient Monuments.
- **1905** A survey and report for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings were undertaken by the architect Basil Stallybrass. He makes recommendations for the preservation of the site.⁸⁰
- **1910** passes to state care.
- **1910-1913** concrete roof inserted over Victorian roof.
- **1954-5** Excavations by Professor Gordon Childe, one of the most famous and influential prehistoric archaeologists of the 20th century.
- **1973-4** Excavations by Professor Colin Renfrew.

⁷⁶ Hibbert, 1823.

⁷⁷ Farrer, 1862.

⁷⁸ Charlton, 1865.

⁷⁹ Stuart, 1865.

⁸⁰ Stallybrass, 1906.

- **1991** Small-scale exploration outside entrance by Dr Colin Richards.
- **1999** Inscribed as part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS, the first archaeological site in Scotland to be designated for its cultural values. Also part of the Brodgar Rural Conservation Area, the only Conservation Area in Scotland designation for its archaeological values.

APPENDIX 2: SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

- **1805** Hibbert gives the first real account of Maeshowe, but interprets it as a target raised for archery practice.⁸¹
- **1849** Captain F W L Thomas gives the first accurate description of the site. Although his survey of the Brodgar area does not extend as far as Maeshowe, he includes an elevation of the mound.⁸² Thomas states that there had been many attempts to explore the mound, with many holes dug into the sides leaving small mounds of earth, particularly on the east side, much disturbed.
- **1861** Antiquarian investigation by Farrer took place in the chamber and passage. Farrer found the outer passage, beyond the door-checks, in a ruinous condition but traced it to the edge of the mound. The chamber was found to be full of stony debris. A W Gibb recorded the visible runic and other carvings following their discovery. Petrie concludes that the mound was probably constructed long before the runes were carved. Farrer's investigations, whilst significant, were unscientific; the monument was cleared out and all of the material contents are now lost, with Petrie's notes and sketches being the only surviving evidence.
- **1954-5** Excavations by MoW, supervised by Professor Gordon Childe undertaken to determine the nature of and relationship between the mound, platform, enclosing bank and ditch. A single section was dug from the outside of the ditch on the S side, through to the core of the mound, across the platform and ditch. The excavations revealed complex stratigraphy, identified low revetment walls within the mound, and revealed that the platform was an artificially enhanced natural glacial knoll. Childe's excavations were the first systematic and modern investigations at Maeshowe. It is also the first example of palaeoenvironmental study in Orkney; samples were recovered and studied for pollen and microfossil evidence.

⁸¹ Hibbert, 1823.

⁸² Thomas, 1852.

- **1973-4** Excavations undertaken by Colin Renfrew with the objective to obtain samples for radiocarbon dating. Renfrew's trenches focused upon the ditches and outer bank but ran on to the platform. Two trenches were excavated across the ditch on the N and SE sides of the mound. No finds were recovered during excavations, but a series of radiocarbon dates were obtained providing a terminus ante quem for the construction of the ditch, suggesting the original ditch and bank were Neolithic in date, but that the outer bank was modified during the Norse period c. 950 AD.
- **1990** Resistivity and magnetic susceptibility surveys of the platform was carried out by Richards.
- **1991** Two periods of excavation were undertaken ahead of laying of a new pathway, repairs to rabbit damage and the installation of new drainage. These small scale excavations have provided us with a clearer understanding of the overall form and relative chronology of the site.

The first area of excavation focused upon the platform. Directly outside the present entrance to the tomb, below the clay platform, the remains of a stone paved pathway covering a stone drain was discovered. This is thought to be part of an entranceway into an earlier structure lying beneath the later tomb.

The second area focused upon the outer bank and an area of platform at the rear of the tomb. The encircling bank was found to have once comprised a substantial wall, approximately 2m thick and probably of similar height. This wall can be provisionally dated to the late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age. At a later date (circa 9th century AD) a further deposit of stone rubble was placed on the collapsed wall effectively creating the bank appearance which we see today.

The small trench to the rear of the mound, on the platform, revealed a large stone socket with its packing intact. The standing stone had been removed in antiquity. The size of the upright would have been comparable to the stones composing the Stones of Stenness and from the position of the Maeshowe stone it is quite possible that it was also part of a stone circle which would have surrounded the tomb.⁸³

- **2000** Shallow excavations carried out within the main chamber and on the overlying mound alongside rewiring works. A slab of concrete was found to cover the top of the mound, demonstrating the level of earlier disturbance and alteration. No finds were recovered.

⁸³ Richards, 2005.

A hole measuring 800 x 700mm and c. 200mm deep was dug for a plaque at the path edge, outside the enclosure – the trench was found to be sterile.⁸⁴

- **2004-5** Geophysical survey undertaken as part of an extensive research project across the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site and Buffer Zones. Areas to the NW and SW of Maeshowe were surveyed using magnetometry. Results indicated a number of possible archaeological features, including a possible new settlement to the NW and suggestions of an oval enclosure to the SW. Much of the results were obscured by geology and ploughing.
- **2005** Watching brief undertaken as part of a programme of works to investigate problems with water ingress into the roof of the tomb. Three 1 x 2m trenches were excavated to locate and examine the nature of the concrete layer installed over the roof in the early 20th century.

A second phase of works involved excavation of a trench 10 x 10m to fully expose the concrete layer. Excavations on the summit demonstrated that the early 20th-century roof comprises a square raft of concrete, domed towards the centre, some 9m across, with a bitumen coating. A drain was formed around the edge of this by infilling the 'lip' at the limits of the raft with sand and gravel, and laying roof slates over this. The concrete raft was covered by a substantial deposit of silty clay, free of finds. This was generally 650mm thick, but thinned to 350mm at the edge of the trench, continuing beyond the edges of excavation. The E edge of the trench excavated by Childe in the 1950s was used for the installation of the new drainage pipe for the most part, but was not possible further down the slope where Childe's trench edges were unclear. A shallow trench was opened in an attempt to locate the line of the earlier trench, which indicated the presence of significant archaeological material likely to represent undisturbed Neolithic layers in this area, lying less than 100mm below the turf covering the mound. A narrow trench was excavated from the mound across the platform to the ditch in the S – presumed Neolithic layers were found 70-80mm below the turf.

These limited investigations demonstrated the presence of compact and complex layers, with potential undisturbed archaeological deposits lying close to the surface. As a result of this, it was recommended that any future ground disturbance work is done under strict archaeological controls, and in an area of sufficient size to allow a reasonable understanding of what is found.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Sharman, 2000; Stewart, 2000.

⁸⁵ Murray and Hollinrake, 2006.