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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90276)

Taken into State care: 1924 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SKARA BRAE



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SKARA BRAE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a Neolithic village occupied from around 3100 to 2500 BC, part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site. For a prehistoric settlement the state of preservation – the height of the surviving walls and the internal fittings – is unparalleled in northern Europe.

In simplistic terms, the visible remains can be divided into two main phases (within which the order of construction of individual structures can often be identified):

- **Earlier village** (Houses 6¹, 9 and 10; 4¹, 12 and 13), largely obscured by later village; buildings originally largely free-standing.
- **Later village** (Houses 1-8) built on same site on gradually levelled remains of earlier village; houses slightly larger, similar house plan ('beds' no longer built into wall), but largely built into midden. The houses are connected by narrow roofed passages.

Sited on the South side of Skail Bay, Mainland Orkney, its seaward side is defended by an early 20th-century coastal wall.

Visitors first approach the site through a Visitor Centre and have the opportunity to enter a replica of the best preserved house, no. 7. The site is about 350m away, as the crow flies. They are unable to enter any of the houses or roofed passages on the site, but can view most of these from the wallhead or ground level.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- 1850 storm leads to partial exposure of site. 1850-67 and 1913 clearance of parts of site by antiquarians while coastal erosion continues to destroy parts of it. Parts of the site, particularly House 1, are rebuilt (with fanciful elements, such as a window!)
- 1922 Site comes into guardianship; coastal erosion continues until seawall constructed 1925-6.
- 1927 further clearance of site. From 1928-1930, Gordon V Childe, one of the most famous and influential prehistoric archaeologists of the 20th century, supervises the further clearance of the site. The present appearance of the site is largely a direct consequence of this programme of works, the primary motivation of which was presenting the site to the public. This involves putting a roof over House 7 in 1932.
- 1972-3 Small-scale investigations by the National Museums of Scotland.
- 1999 Inscribed as part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS, the first archaeological site in Scotland to be designated for its cultural values.

- The history of the discovery of Skara Brae is directly linked to the inhabitants of the adjacent Skail House, a well documented house whose role in the social and political history of Orkney means that it has an outstanding historical value.

Archaeological Overview

- Skara Brae is one of the earliest known farming settlements in the British Isles; fortuitously, it is also the best preserved. This survival can be explained by its largely subterranean construction and the fact that it filled up with sand early in prehistory.
- Only in 1936-7 was the site recognised as being neolithic as opposed to Pictish (i.e. 3000 years younger) (it was dug in the days before scientific dating techniques were available).
- For such a famous and archaeologically significant site, regrettably little is known about its development because of the generally poor manner in which it was cleared and recorded.
- Small-scale excavations in 1972-3, as yet unpublished, have helped to refine our understanding of aspects of the site (particularly environmental aspects relating to prehistoric daily life) and provided scientific dates, which were otherwise lacking. These also demonstrated the existence of waterlogged deposits, which means that the site retains high potential to recover organic remains.
- Skara Brae is without hesitation the best preserved prehistoric settlement of any period in the British Isles, and has few competitors in Europe as a whole. The outstanding quality of its preservation enables us to gain a vivid impression of the realities of living in a prehistoric village. It also demonstrates that this must have been a community that could co-ordinate its building programmes and chose to conform closely regarding house forms, perhaps an indication of egalitarian social values.
- The artefacts from Skara Brae are of exceptional significance in their own right. In addition to good evidence for farming, fishing, leisure and various craft activities, there is a good range of jewellery and some curious, very sculptural, special stone objects that are presumed to have had a ritual function.
- A very large number of the stones in the settlement have been carved in neolithic times (these are often very light incisions). There are some patterns in where these are situated and where particular types of design are used. Such carvings can be difficult to see and arguably their expression was also muted in the past (although the use of pigments, such as haematite, to enhance their appearance must be considered). The designs used on the buildings can be related to the design vocabulary on select artefacts from the site, and beyond. How such designs relate to expressions of individual and community identity can only be a matter of informed speculation, but hints at complexities we will never understand.

- The village is but the best known and most accessible facet of the extensive multi-period archaeology that survives in the Bay of Skall.
- Skara Brae is linked to the other sites in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS by more than chronology, for example the relationship between the plans of houses and tombs, the design of carvings and the use of certain types of pottery.
- The visible hills to the North include Vestra Fiold where evidence has been found for quarrying of standing stones. This may have been a source for some of the stones in the Brodgar and Stenness area.
- The architecture of Skara Brae, and the Grooved ware pottery that its inhabitants used, links it to the architecture of contemporary tombs that are similar in plan to Maeshowe, as opposed to the Orkney-Cromarty type tombs and similar shaped houses whose inhabitants used Unstan ware.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The quality of preservation of the buildings and fittings allows an insight to be gained into the accomplished building skills of people living in northern Scotland 5,000 years ago. The technique of curating and then building up a compact midden (decayed rubbish heap) into which the later phase of houses is constructed is unusual. The effort involved in this, and the realities of living with this material while it was stored, requires special explanation. Wholly or partly subterranean prehistoric architecture is not unusual in northern and western Scotland, nor is the accumulation of large quantities of midden, but the deliberate use of midden material to house structures is. It is not thought that the later settlement was largely subterranean for defensive purposes, although the decision to build in this way clearly demands explanation.
- Two buildings stand out from the rest: House 8 because it was apparently free-standing, had a lot of internal decoration and was used for a range of craft activities that involved the use of fire; and House 7, which is more of a physical challenge to reach than the other structures, has a hearth in the outer doorway, the entrance can be barred from the outside (as opposed to inside, which is more normal), one of the beds is prominently decorated, and this bed lies directly over the only neolithic burial from the site: two mature women buried in a crouched position in a cist.
- The so-called 'dresser' is a particularly well-known 'trademark' of Skara Brae. While the preservation of the stone elements of the furniture is good, of course we are missing the complementary organic aspects of this: bedding, floor materials, etc.
- There is a complex system of well-built drains and large cisterns beneath much of the settlement. This provides evidence for a level of sophistication and co-ordinated planning in advance of laying out the village.

- No original roofs survive and their precise form is a matter of some debate: did they use timber, whale bone, turf, seaweed, etc?

Social Overview

- Second most popular attraction for tourists in Orkney after Ring of Brodgar.
- A Community Study that will in part address this issue is in progress as part of a Manchester University PhD by Angie McClanahan, supervised by Dr Siân Jones and funded by Historic Scotland. Skara Brae is, however, only a minor component of this study.
- Skara Brae is a much photographed and illustrated icon of Orkney.
- Used by Orkney Schools for educational purposes and also visited by locals. Locals make particularly good use of the adjacent sandy beach for family days out.

Spiritual Overview

- See reference to Community Study above.
- Ritual is likely to have been embedded in most aspects of daily life (house form may be related to cosmological beliefs, etc), but there are a range of features at Skara Brae which stand out as being particularly unusual and for which a 'ritual' function is therefore attributed. These include the special architectural treatment of House 7, the fact that there were some burials in its lower levels, the presence of carvings here (and elsewhere in the settlement) and a range of fascinating ornate stone objects.

Aesthetic Overview

- Skara Brae is situated in an 'enclosed bay landscape': it is a classic sandy bay with white shell sand, some shingle and rock platforms running out the skerries. Small in scale and closely confined, the Bay of Skail is defined at its outer limit by high cliffs and within the bay by ridges and hills. It is rounded and smooth in a regular horse-shoe-shape
- Today the surviving elements of the subterranean village at Skara Brae lie hard and low against the coast on the South side of the Bay of Skail. This attractive and dramatic maritime backdrop, as captured in many a photograph, is misleading in the sense that the coast has retreated inland: Skara Brae was originally an inland site beside a freshwater loch.
- Skara Brae and the Bay of Skail are dominated by the nearby 17th-century (and later) Skail House, a Category A listed building, and its home steading. Less obvious are the remains of prehistoric and later sites that survive as 'humps and bumps'. The larger scheduled area that surrounds the Property in Care (the WHS), is designated as the Inner Buffer Zone of the WHS and is intended to help protect its setting. The curtilage of Skail House is the Outer

Buffer Zone. This incorporates the Designed Landscape of Skail House, now listed in the non-statutory HS/SNH Inventory *by inclusion in the Supplementary Volume for the Highlands and Islands*. On visual grounds, the setting of Skara Brae is better defined by the hills of the surrounding enclosed bay.

- From the beach the visitor looks up at a sturdy but handsome seawall.
- The site is often photographed from the air where its visually intriguing cellular and geometric building forms are readily distinguished from the surrounding blanket of pasture. Yet the organic stone and turf form of the monument is in harmony with the surroundings.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Refer to forthcoming WHS Research Agenda.
- Publication of 1970s excavations (this is nearing completion).
- Despite its fame, very little of the site has been archaeologically investigated to modern standards and fundamental questions about the site remain to be addressed. We know little of what survives beneath the present ground surface/visible structures and that the excavators did not properly recognise the stratigraphical and chronological complexity of the deposits they removed to expose the village. The system of drains and large cisterns is particularly enigmatic.
- We will never know how big the original Skara Brae settlement was.
- Where and how did the people live while they demolished their earlier houses, built up the artificial mound of midden and constructed their houses in it, particularly if this process took a generation?
- However, the potential remains to get a better understanding of the relationship of this village to the other Neolithic activity in the Bay (not least a large settlement mound immediately to its SW).

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Skara Brae is an exceptionally well preserved prehistoric village: the quality and scale of the preservation of buildings, stone-built furniture is remarkable; this is complemented by a fine range of ritual and domestic artefacts. Its preservation allows a level of interpretation that is unmatched on other excavated settlement sites of this period in Europe. Such settlements in Orkney are largely otherwise known only from their ground-plan.
- Speaks of an early and sophisticated society in northern Britain.
- There is an intimate relationship between the types of settlements and ritual sites encountered 6km away at the rest of the Heart of Neolithic WHS.

- One element in a wider archaeological and historical landscape of which very little is as yet well understood.
- Lies in a much designated area for various forms of cultural significance; includes being part of a WHS.
- World-famous icon of Orkney.
- A site of outstanding significance all round; however, its coastal location is precarious and requires careful management if this world-class resource is to be secured for ever.

Associated Properties

Other elements of WHS: **Maeshowe, Stones of Stenness, Barnhouse Stone and Watchstone, Ring of Brodgar.**

Other settlements: Rinyo, Pool, Brodgar, Barnhouse, Stonehall (by **Cuween**), below **Widford Cairn; Knap of Howar; Links of Noltland.**

Finds from the excavations at Skara Brae are in the National Museums of Edinburgh in Scotland, some of which are on loan to Historic Scotland in the Visitor Centre.

Keywords neolithic, village, furniture, dresser, burials, neolithic carvings, special carved stone objects, Gordon V Childe, World Heritage Site, Orkney, Bay of Skail, Skail House, Vestra Field