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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC276

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90035)

Taken into State care: 1956 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BLACKHAMMER CHAMBERED CAIRN



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BLACKHAMMER CHAMBERED CAIRN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a neolithic chambered cairn used for communal burials that falls into a broad tradition of building stone chambered cairns which started in Scotland around 4000 BC. The interior of the tomb is divided into 7 compartments. A period of secondary reuse involving blocking of the entrance is poorly understood. The original roof does not survive.

The tomb was excavated in the mid -1930s and covered shortly afterwards with a concrete roof through which visitors can now access the site (the original entrance, at right angles to the chamber, can be seen but is not accessible). Situated on the south side of the island of Rousay, the small cairn sits within a small enclosure on the lower slopes of a hillside, a very short distance from the road.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- One of a series of important prehistoric monuments in Orkney excavated in the late 1920s/1930s by Callander and Grant (Director of National Museum of Antiquities and influential rich local antiquarian/owner respectively) subsequently passed to state care (in 1956).
- Example of state involvement in conservation of a monument prior to its coming into care.

Archaeological Overview

- By analogy with other sites, this tomb dates to between 3500 and 2500 cal BC.
- This type of cairn is found in north and west Scotland, but the greatest density is here on Rousay where their distribution clearly relates to prehistoric landholding of different social sub-groups.
- In shape and subdivision by upright slabs the chamber of the cairn is similar to contemporary houses at **Knap of Howar** on Papa Westray, Orkney. The inference is that these tombs were built as houses for the dead.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Good example of what archaeologists call the Orkney-Cromarty type of chambered cairn; the variant well represented by Blackhammer, and found in Orkney and Caithness only, consists of a rectangular cairn with stalled chambers.
- The stones forming the well-built external wall of the cairn have, in part, been carefully arranged in slanting groups to give the visually dramatic effect of obliquely hatched triangles. Instances of such decorative features in the construction of neolithic chambered tombs are relatively rare.
- One of a group of excavated Orcadian monuments that was roofed in the 1930s. The approach to the conservation of these monuments, techniques involved and subsequent management problems arising from this is of interest in terms of development of ideas of conservation history and the unusual management issues that arise from this in the present through the algal greening of the interiors of the monuments.

Social Overview

- Not assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- The monument attests to belief in an afterlife 5000 years ago.

Aesthetic Overview

- While the decorative stonework is of interest because of its resonances with other neolithic art, the monument's aesthetic qualities are otherwise fairly limited, except as a small green mound on a pleasant hillside.
- Good views over Eynhallow Sound.
- The interior of the tomb shows the greening effect of algae, a direct product of how the site has been conserved.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Social and modern spiritual value not assessed.
 - No scientific dates.
 - Nothing is known of the activity in the immediate vicinity of this tomb or the community with which it is associated.
 - A history of Walter G Grant and his role in Orcadian archaeology, including the various monuments now in state care, would enhance appreciation of recent archaeological history of site and its local social significance.
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ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- A relatively well preserved neolithic tomb of a distinctive form that has parallels in some contemporary neolithic domestic architecture.
- Decorative stonework is a relatively rare feature of such monuments.
- One of a high concentration of neolithic tombs sited on Rousay. The most obvious indicator of neolithic settlement in most parts of Scotland is its burial architecture and this density of monuments and their relationship to each other is particularly important for understanding how neolithic peoples inhabited, organised and shared the landscape and its resources.
- One of a string of excavated chambered cairns in the care of Historic Environment Scotland on the south side of Rousay.
- One of a group of important prehistoric monuments in Orkney excavated in around the 1930s by Walter G Grant and W G Callander that later came into state care.

Associated Properties

Midhowe chambered cairn, Knowe of Yarso, Unstan, Isbister; closely related monument at **Taversøe Tuick**. Contemporary burial monuments of different type in Orkney include **Maeshowe, Wideford, Cuween, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray South, Wideford** and the **Dwarfie Stane**. For parallel neolithic house forms, **Knap of Howar**. Finds from the excavations are in the National Museums of Scotland and University of Aberdeen.

Keywords neolithic, chambered cairn, Orkney-Cromarty (stalled)-type, burials, house, decorative stonework.