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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90245);

Taken into State care: 1927 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2018

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RENNIBISTER EARTH HOUSE



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RENNIBISTER EARTH HOUSE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument at Rennibister comprises a souterrain (an underground chamber). Nothing is visible at ground level other than the modern enclosure that protects the entrance. This is within the working farmyard of Rennibister Farm, on Orkney Mainland. The souterrain is undoubtedly just a small part of a much larger late prehistoric settlement. The site is exceptionally rare for the discovery of human remains within it.

Visitors access the souterrain by climbing down through the original roof, via a modern hatch and ladder, into the main, roughly hexagonal chamber (3.3 by 2.5m). The walls are constructed partly of slabs on edge and partly of coursed drystone masonry, and the roofing slabs are supported by four free-standing stone pillars. At the opposite end from where the visitor enters the original entrance passage (around 3.5m long) can be seen sloping upwards towards its contemporary ground level.

Note: an alternative name for a souterrain is an earth house; this terminology is still common in Orkney.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Souterrain discovered in 1926 when its roof collapsed under the weight of a threshing machine, exposing the underground chamber.
- Clearance of the chamber by the Orkney Antiquarian Society under the supervision of Hugh Marwick followed almost immediately and the site came into State care shortly after, in 1927.
- Sometime after 1928 the upper levels of the monument and the ground above it were reconstructed by the Ministry of Public Building and Works.

Archaeological Overview

- The souterrain at Rennibister is sited near the top of a low mound on the flanks of which are the modern buildings of Rennibister Farm (the original mound is probably now landscaped). It used to be thought that souterrains existed in isolation but it is now recognized from the evidence of crop marks and excavation that they are usually associated with either timber roundhouses and/or stone buildings from which they are often entered. It is probable that the mound at Rennibister indicates there was a large and long-lived settlement associated with the souterrain and, as is often the case, this settlement continued long after the souterrain went out of use.
- A number souterrains have been found in association with complex roundhouse/broch sites in Orkney, such as Howe and Cairns O' The Bu, Windwick (known as 'The Cairns').

- The souterrain at Howe had similar radial divisions and re-using the centre of Neolithic chambered tomb. The site at Rennibister may have had a similarly complex and long development history.
- Souterrains are semi-subterranean chambers lined with stone or timber found throughout Scotland, but particularly Angus and Perthshire, Aberdeenshire, around the Moray Firth, Caithness, Sutherland, and the Northern and Western Isles. Most lie in areas of fertile agricultural land (although this may also be due to the potential of these soils to produce crop marks which lead to their recognition). Not only do they come in a variety of shapes and sizes, their widespread dating also implies different functions. The northern examples are earlier Iron Age in date (late first millennia BC), while the Angus and Perthshire examples (which form a distinctive group) apparently date to the earlier centuries BC/AD; no examples of timber souterrains have been found in the northern isles.
- The approximate date range for souterrain construction and use has continually been pushed back, many are significantly earlier in date than once thought.
- With their year-round even temperature souterrains may have served as places for storage of crops (the excavator of the Shanzie souterrain in Angus argues that the structure would have been too damp for grain storage and suggest beer storage as a more appropriate use) and perhaps dairy produce, although direct evidence for this is still lacking – analyses from the excavation of a very well-preserved souterrain at Ardownie in Angus will add to our understanding. Their existence seems to indicate that the communities who built them were well capable of producing, storing and presumably redistributing large quantities of cereal on an individual household and corporate level.
- Rennibister is highly unusual because, when examined in the 1920s, the floor of the main chamber was covered with disarticulated human bones from up to 19 individuals, including adults and children of both sexes. Although undated, it seems probable that these are middle to late Iron Age in date (probably first half of the first millennium AD) and are secondary, i.e. the souterrain was not built to be a burial chamber. Any evidence for Iron Age burial in Scotland is very rare, let alone the apparently complex sequence of burial rites that must have led to this mass deposition of multiple human remains. The human bone has not been analysed; a recent search found that the bones were lost at some time after 1924. The only other find was an ox-scapula 'spade'.
- Some have speculated that the human remains may have been taken from a nearby Neolithic chambered cairn and incorporated into the site as a ritual deposit.
- The original entrance passage appears to have been deliberately blocked, though the date of this is unknown. Clearance of the site in the 1920s revealed a high concentration of shells in a deposit at the end of the passage, this included whelks, cockles and cowrie shells.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The construction of this underground chamber involved considerable labour and skill.
- The use of pinnings between the slender stone orthostats and the roof slabs appear to be very precarious but they have been employed with such skill that they are still secure and functioning.
- The use of flagstone uprights, corbelling and the presence of feature such as stone recesses/niches are reminiscent of other stone-built prehistoric structures in Orkney, both from broadly contemporary sites such as Midhowe and Gurness, and from early Neolithic structures. However, the stonework in souterrains is generally less finished.
- The stonework comprises a combination of quarried stone and natural boulders. The free-standing pillars are smooth, possibly water worn and may have been used elsewhere before being incorporated into this structure.
- The use of flagstone pillars to support the roof appears to be a design unique to Orcadian souterrains.
- Consolidation and reconstruction was carried out at the time the site came into care. Modern interventions have been painted white/grey to distinguish them from original stonework.

Social Overview

- Because of their ubiquity, souterrains cannot be taken as indicators of high status, although the ability to store large amounts of food and seed would have increased the power and stability of the associated community.
- Modern social value not assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- Ritual functions may possibly be attributed to some souterrains: we should note the presence of small niches and incorporation of prehistoric rock art, in particular. Parallels might be drawn with the underground chambers/'wells' in brochs (e.g. **Gurness** and **Mid Howe**) or contemporary Iron Age sites such as **Minehowe**. The Rennibister souterrain contains a number of small aumbries or niches which may have had a ritual purpose. The later burials at Rennibister certainly indicate that it was appropriate to use this underground chamber for pagan, spiritual reasons. The bones were apparently from disarticulated skeletons and had been intentionally arranged; an especially rare discovery for this site type. A recently excavated site at Knowe of Skea, Westray, Orkney, a possible mortuary site, is the only other apparently pagan Iron Age site in Orkney from which so many human remains have been discovered.

Aesthetic Overview

- Nothing is visible of the monument above ground. Below ground the most obvious visual impression is of a sturdy and cleverly constructed, if slightly cramped, chamber, in which the local stone has been used to imaginative effect.

- The monument is still within an agricultural setting, at the heart of a modern farm.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- There are no scientific dates from this monument or its contents.
- The bones from the site have not been examined to modern scientific standards. Historic Environment Scotland's predecessor body recently agreed to fund such an analysis, but it proved impossible to locate the bones.
- Given the nature of the record of the 1920s works (the bones were 'hopelessly mixed'), it is impossible to say much about the sequence of events leading to the burial of so many individuals, e.g. the sequence in which these took place and over what period of time, although we can infer that the bodies may have been buried/exposed somewhere else in the first instance and gathered together, collectively or individually for reburial.
- The nature of the associated settlement has never been examined: its nature, date and full extent are unknown.
- As a group, less is known about northern souterrains in comparison to the more southerly examples of this type of structure. There is a tendency to group such underground chambers together, but we know that there are considerable variations in form and date. The relationship between such superficially similar monuments in different parts of Scotland would merit further investigation, as would further investigation into the date and function of such structures.
- The primary function and use-life of the monument is unknown.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The Rennibister souterrain is a well-preserved example of a northern Scottish Iron Age underground chamber, one of the very few that can be formally accessed by the visiting public.
- Although there is no direct evidence for the nature of the associated settlement, the survival of the original entrance passage and underground chamber within this large low mound provides a setting for beginning to understand and interpret the wider prehistoric site.
- The most unusual facet of this site is not visible (and the evidence mislaid), the series of mixed, disarticulated human burials that were found within the interior of the chamber. Presumed to be middle to later Iron Age in date, human remains from this period are rare anywhere in Scotland. Unfortunately, the circumstances of discovery mean that it is not possible to fully understand the significance of these, but they hint at complex, multi-stage burial rites.

- Sited in the middle of a working farm, there is a sense of continuity of function as a place where farmers have lived and worked the land (note: there is no evidence, however, for unbroken occupation).

Associated HES Properties

Grain Earth House, Orkney. Broadly contemporary with some settlement on brochs, such as **Gurness** and **Mid Howe**.

Related souterrains elsewhere in Scotland: **Tealing Earth House**, **Ardestie Earth House**, **Carlungie Earth House**, **Castlelaw Hill fort** (contains a souterrain).

The excavated finds are said to be in the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh, but the bones recently could not be located.

Keywords

souterrain, earth-house, settlement, Iron Age, burials, disarticulated bones, Orkney

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