



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC290

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90122)

Taken into State care: 1911 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DWARFIE STANE



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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DWARFIE STANE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a prehistoric rock-cut tomb which is situated in open moorland on the south side of a steep-sided valley which cuts off the north-west corner of Hoy. A massive block of sandstone has been hollowed out to create a main chamber with two side cells. The entrance was at one point blocked with a massive stone (now to one side), the tomb being broken into from the top sometime no later than the 16th century.

The site is approached following a short walk through heather moorland along a path that has been formalised for much of its length. Visitors can scramble into the interior of the tomb.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Very early antiquarian interest.
- Considerable folklore attaches to the stone, a source of early fascination.
- Popularised by Sir Walter Scott in *The Pirate*.
- 18th-century and later graffiti, including 1846 Hugh Miller (apparently the famous Cromarty stonemason) and an 1850 Latin and Persian inscription by Major W Mouncey (a former British spy).
- Passed into guardianship in 1911.

Archaeological Overview

- The contents of this monument are not recorded and its role as a neolithic burial place is inferred on the basis of its form.
- By analogy with other sites, the tomb dates to between 3500 and 2500 cal BC.
- The cutting of rock to form prehistoric tombs is rare in itself, but this is the only example in the British Isles of an above-ground boulder that has been used as a tomb. There is no associated cairn.
- The only recognised prehistoric chambered tomb on Hoy.
- The construction of this tomb without metal tools was an enormous feat of human achievement.
- As noted elsewhere in Orkney, peck dressing of the stonework is present in select locations within the tomb interior.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The tomb is described by archaeologists as belonging to the Bookan sub-group of the Orkney-Cromarty chambered cairns, i.e. a central chamber with side chambers defined by 'stalls', in this case low sills.

Social Overview

Not assessed, but note that the monument is sited within an SSSI, RSPB Reserve and National Scenic Area.

Spiritual Overview

- The tomb reflects belief in an afterlife 5000 years ago.
- If the ledge at the east end of the south chamber is interpretable as a 'stone pillow' it gives a fascinated insight into ancient beliefs.

Aesthetic Overview

- The handtooling of the tomb is pleasing.
- The tomb is sited in a stunning mountainous valley, its boulder form sitting comfortably within the landscape. Sited on a terrace, the tomb is visible for quite some distance.
- The beautiful Persian calligraphy is well carved.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- No scientific archaeological exploration and no scientific dates.
- No assessment of social or spiritual value exists.
- Nothing is known of the activity in the immediate vicinity of this tomb or the community with which it is associated.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Only wholly rock-cut prehistoric tomb in the British Isles, its plan having parallels with chambered cairns of the Bookan type.
- Prehistoric technical achievement to create.
- Only known neolithic tomb on Hoy.
- Fascinating local folklore.
- Popularised in Scott's *The Pirate*.
- Potential associations with Hugh Miller.
- Unusual, beautifully crafted and interesting Persian inscription.

Associated Properties

Taversøe Tuick; also the stalled cairns at **Midhowe, Blackhammer, Knowe of Yarso, Unstan**. Broadly contemporary tombs at **Maeshowe, Wideford, Cuween, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray South**, Bookan.

Keywords neolithic, chambered tomb, rock-cut, Orkney-Cromarty (Bookan) type, peck marks, folklore, Persian inscription, *The Pirate*, Walter Scott, Hugh Miller, nature reserve, birds.