STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

GRAIN EARTH HOUSE

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.
GRAIN EARTH HOUSE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION
The monument at Grain comprises a souterrain (known locally as an earth house).

Constructed of coursed, drystone masonry, the rock-cut souterrain lies c.2m below the current ground surface, and comprises a curving passageway leading to an oval chamber. It is covered by a low raised mound (of modern date), the layout of which coincides with the plan of the structure below. The souterrain is accessed via a modern entrance and stairway, of which only the lower steps are original.

The unpaved interior is in two parts: a passage and chamber. At the junction of the stair and passage are two recesses (aumbries/niches) set into the wall. From this point, the chamber is entered from a curved, narrow passage c. 5m in length, the base of which has been lowered by modern excavation in order to provide greater ease of access. The low, oval chamber (c.3m long and c.1.6m high) has an exposed rock-cut base, and a lintelled roof supported by four slender stone orthostats, and reinforced by modern phosphor bronze bars.

The site is located within a fenced-off area on a wide grassy verge in the Hatston Industrial Estate on Mainland Orkney. Visitor access information is available on the Historic Environment Scotland website. There is no illumination within the souterrain.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

• 1827 discovery of site, probably in course of ploughing.

• 1857 souterrain reopened by Farrer and Petrie; the chamber was found to be empty. Above ground they found pits containing charred wood, bones of domestic animals, and shellfish.

• 1901 trenches dug over large area to relocate this site (the precise locations of which are now unknown); chamber and passage recleared. Occupation deposits found in surrounding area, indicative of wider associated settlement.

• 1908 site comes into state care. It is unclear what conservation and presentational works were undertaken at this time, although it seems that the modern entranceway and stairs were inserted and that the low mound indicating the plan of the souterrain may have been constructed shortly after this.

• 1939 Another souterrain was discovered nearby when the wartime airfield (later transformed into the industrial estate) was constructed. The Ministry of Works removed and stored the uprights from this second souterrain with a view to subsequent re-erection, but were buried near to their original location where they remain. Ministry of Works concrete boundary markers delimit the burial site.
1982 Excavations beyond the guardianship area uncovered another souterrain 6m west of Grain. It was overlain by an Iron Age structure with stone and earth floors, as well as a hearth, plus additional structures to the south.

Archaeological Overview

- 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. The discovery of a souterrain and associated structures immediately to the west strongly suggests that Grain was part of a larger settlement. The full extent of this is not known.

- Souterrains are semi-subterranean chambers 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 apparent distribution 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 millennium BC), while the Angus and Perthshire examples (which form a distinctive group) apparently date to the earlier centuries BC/AD.

- The approximate date range for souterrain construction and use has continually been pushed back, excavations are showing that many are significantly earlier in date than once thought.

- There are three main theories on the purpose of souterrains; storage, refuge and ritual.

- 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. 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.

- The lower portion of a saddle quern is said to be built into the southwest corner of the chamber.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The construction of this underground chamber involved considerable labour and skill, not least the excavation of a large hole into bedrock, and the lining of this with the visible dry-stone construction, prior to the erection of further structures in the above-ground settlement.
• The lower levels of the souterrain are rock-cut, and it is some 2m below the present ground level. The sloping floor causes water to pool in certain areas.

• In addition to the main chamber, the passage, and lower levels of the original steps have survived. These form part of the present access to the site and thus give the visitor an accurate impression of how the interior of the souterrain was originally accessed.

• The presence of a 1m recessed area at the right of the base of the stairs is intriguing. It has been suggested that this might relate to either a second chamber or an alternative entranceway.

• In common with other Orkney souterrains, this is a finely constructed building with careful attention to detail. Of particular note is the way in which the roof is constructed; the four free-standing orthostats each support one end of a massive horizontal lintel whose opposite end is bedded into the inner face of the chamber wall; these then provide support for the large lintels that span the rest of the roof. 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 free-standing flagstone pillars to support the roof is a design typical of Orcadian souterrains.

• The aumbries/niches in the walls are best defined in Orcadian souterrains, although it remains unclear what their function was.

• Consolidation and reconstruction was carried out in 1901, and in 1908 after the monument had come into care.

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, but the presence of modern graffiti should be noted.

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. In the case of Grain there are two recesses that may have had a ritual purpose. 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.

Aesthetic Overview
• This is a sturdy and cleverly constructed subterranean chamber in which the locally available stone has been used to imaginative effect.
Above-ground appearances do little to sell such an intriguing and fine site, since it is sited on the edge of a road verge in an industrial estate, with little visible above-ground other than a fence, information panel and low grassy mound. Although the mound does demonstrate the layout and size of the souterrain to those unable to access the monument.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The monument was not excavated to modern scientific standards and this limits what we can say about its date and use. There are no scientific dates for the monument or its contents.

- The full extent and nature of the associated settlement is not known.

- What was the function of the recess on the right hand side at the base of the stairs?

- 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 they are considerable variations in form and date. The relationship between such superficially similar monuments in different parts of Scotland would merit further investigation.

- The primary function and use-life of the monument is unknown.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Grain is a very well preserved example of a northern Scottish Iron Age underground chamber (souterrains), one of the few that can be formally accessed by the visiting public, and the only example in Orkney which can be entered along its original entranceway.

Associated Properties

Rennibister Earth House, Orkney. Broadly contemporary with some of settlement on brochs, such as Gurness and Mid Howe (see SCS for one of these for related monuments).

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

Keywords souterrain, earth house, settlement, Iron Age, Orkney

Select Bibliography


Barry, G. (1867) The History of The Orkney Islands, Kirkwall


RCAHMS (1946) Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Orkney and Shetland, vol. II, Inventory of Orkney, Edinburgh

Thomas, F W L. (1852) ‘An account of some Celtic antiquities of Orkney, including the stones of Stenness, tumuli, Picts houses &c., with plans’, Archaeologia, vol. 34, 1852. Page(s): 131-134
