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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KNOWE OF YARSO CHAMBERED CAIRN



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KNOWE OF YARSO CHAMBERED CAIRN

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The monument comprises a neolithic stalled cairn used for communal burial. It falls into a broad tradition of stone-built chambered cairns which started in Scotland in the 4th millennium BC. It comprises a long drystone chamber divided into four compartments by pairs of upright slabs, with an entrance passage at one end. The outer cairn incorporates diagonally slanting decorative stonework. The roof was robbed in antiquity.

The chamber was found to contain the remains of at least 29 human skeletons, mostly within the innermost of the four compartments. Other items recovered included arrowheads, pottery sherds and a variety of animal bone, including the remains of at least 36 red deer.

The tomb was excavated in the early 1930s and covered shortly afterwards with a concrete roof. After entering through a modern door, visitors access the tomb interior through the original entrance passage which is on the same axis as the chamber. Situated on the south side of the island of Rousay, the cairn sits within a small enclosure on a terrace on the middle slopes of a hillside. Here it occupies a prominent position on a flat shelf, from which the land drops down sharply to the seaward side. It is approached after a walk of half a mile or so, uphill, through rough grazings.

1.2 Statement of significance

- A relatively well preserved neolithic tomb of a distinctive form that has parallels in some contemporary neolithic domestic architecture.
- The good survival of neolithic decorative stonework is rare.
- 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.
- Member of a group of exceptionally well-preserved and internationally renowned Orcadian monuments that embrace and continue to illuminate in an unparalleled fashion the complexities and sophistication of daily life amongst some of the earliest agricultural communities in Scotland.
- One of a group of important prehistoric monuments in Orkney excavated in around the 1930s by Walter G Grant and Graham Callander that later came into state care.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

2.2 Evidential values

- Analogy with other sites would suggest that this tomb was constructed between 3500 and 2500 BC.
- Excavation revealed the remains of at least 29 individuals, including 15 skulls which had been arranged along the base of the walls. As none of these were articulated, and most were broken, this rearrangement of human remains provides intriguing evidence for the rituals associated with the treatment of human remains here and at similar burial places over extended periods of time. A skull from an adult male produced a radiocarbon date of 3345-3220 cal BC.
- A large volume of fragmentary animal bone was recovered, much of which was scorched or burnt. This included sheep, cattle, dog and the remains of some 36 red deer. There were also numerous limpet shells, an assemblage of 69 flint objects, a bone pin and a worked deer tine.
- It is interesting to note that many of the finds from the upper layers were found to be scorched or burnt, and that the stonework of each compartment had been reddened and cracked by fire from a height of 0.5-0.9m above the floor. It is likely that this activity is associated with the later use of the cairn.
- Beaker pottery was found in the layers associated with the tomb's purposeful filling, and some of the animal bone was dated to the second half of the third millennium BC, suggesting that the tomb continued in some sort of use into the Bronze Age.
- Two samples of red deer bone were radiocarbon dated to around 2200-2050 cal BC, attesting to secondary activity at the site. While secondary deposits were here characterised by a large number of red deer remains, **Cuween** chambered tomb on Mainland Orkney contained the remains of two dozen dogs, contributing to the complex picture of human-animal relationships during the second half of the third millennium in Orkney.
- This type of cairn is found in north and west Scotland, but the greatest density is here on Rousay. It is one of sixteen known chambered cairns on the island (not all are publically accessible), an exceptionally high concentration of such monuments
- Parallels are often drawn between stalled cairns and the houses at **Knap of Howar** on Papa Westray, due to their similar shape and subdivision by upright slabs; the inference being that these tombs were built as houses for the dead. However, recent excavations elsewhere on Orkney seem to support the contemporaneity of stalled cairns with early Neolithic timber houses, which appear to predate the 'classic' linear stone houses.

2.3 Historical values

- Excavated in 1934, as one of a series of important prehistoric monuments excavated in the 1930s by Graham Callander (Director of National Museum of Antiquities) and Walter Grant (influential rich local

antiquarian and owner of the Trumland Estate, who financed the excavation and conservation of many archaeological sites on Rousay).

- It subsequently passed to state care in 1935, and was roofed in 1938.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

- No original roofs of this type of tomb survive intact, but the walls here survived to a considerable height (up to 1.8m high).
- The external façade of the cairn includes diagonally-sloping decorative stonework which today is largely obscured by turf (with the exception of that visible either side of the entrance passage, which has been laid so that the exposed edges slope down symmetrically, away from the entrance). The good survival of such decorative features is rare.
- One of a group of excavated Orcadian monuments that was roofed in the 1930s, and it is interesting to note that a free-standing cover house was originally designed, of a style closer to that realised at Mid Howe cairn. This was revised following the perceived success of the installation of a concrete dome at Taversøe Tuick. 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 greening of the interiors of the monuments.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

- While the decorative stonework is of interest because of its resonances with other neolithic art and pottery decoration, the monument's aesthetic qualities are otherwise fairly limited, except as a small green mound on a pleasant hillside. The profile of the mound is artificial, and results from its 20th century roof and associated interventions.
- Extensive views over Eynhallow Sound.
- Arguably the interior of the tomb is rather marred by the greening effect of algae, a direct product of how the site was conserved in the 20th century.

2.6 Natural heritage values

To be assessed

2.7 Contemporary/use values

To be assessed

3 Major gaps in understanding

- Social and spiritual values not assessed.
- Clarity required regarding chronology of the site, particularly date of construction.
- Nothing is known of the activity in the immediate vicinity of this tomb or the community with which it is associated. Settlement directly associated with the Knowe of Yarso has not yet been identified, though note excavation at Braes of Ha'Breck on neighbouring island of Wyre.
- Building upon the 1985 work by D. Reynolds and G. Ritchie, a history of Walter 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.
- Further analysis of complex human-animal relationships, as suggested by secondary deposits dominated by a particular animal species.

4 Associated properties

Chambered cairns of **Mid Howe, Blackhammer** (both with decorative stonework), **Knowe of Unstan, Taversoe Tuick**, Isbister. Broadly contemporary burial monuments of different type in Orkney include **Maeshowe, Wideford Hill, Cuween Hill, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray**, and the **Dwarfie Stane**. For parallel neolithic house forms, **Knap of Howar**, Braes of Ha'Breck. Finds from the excavations, including skeletal remains, are in the University of Aberdeen Museums and the National Museums of Scotland.

5 Keywords

neolithic, chambered cairn, chambered tomb, Orkney-Cromary (stalled)-type, burials, house, decorative stonework.