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**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90091)

**Taken into State care:** 1938 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2004

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# CULSH EARTH HOUSE



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# CULSH EARTH HOUSE

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Situated immediately to the north of Culsh steading, a farm west of Tarland village in Aberdeenshire, the monument comprises an earth house (or souterrain) of probable Iron Age date. Following its discovery in 1853, the interior was cleared of a considerable volume of soil under the direction of the antiquary John Stuart revealing two cup-marked stones built into the drystone walls and several other finds including a broken urn, ox bones and a large bead.

Little of the monument is visible from the surface, other than the unobtrusive entrance giving access into the earthhouse, effectively a low, curving subterranean passageway. On rounding the curve, the passageway opens into a higher round-ended space at the earthhouse's terminal.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

1853: Culsh earthhouse is discovered and cleared of soil under the direction of John Stuart, president of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

c.1864: Mr Douglas, tenant at Culsh, re-instates the earthhouse's covering of turf. Prior to this, the exposed earthhouse suffered from souvenir hunters removing stones from its walls.

1938: guardianship agreement signed.

### Archaeological Overview

The earthhouse occupies an elevated position near Culsh steading, its location probably chosen to aid drainage. In 1853, the tenant informed John Stuart of another souterrain in the vicinity. The souterrain measures approximately 14.5m in length, the passage broadening from 0.75m at the entrance on the W to 1.8m at its circular terminal and measures up to 1.8m in height, the roof being highest in the terminal. Throughout, the souterrain's walls rest on a lower course of massive boulders and are corbelled inwards toward the top to support the roof of massive flat slabs. Although originally of drystone construction, the stones were mortared in place by the Ministry of Works in the 1930s.

Reporting on the clearance work, Stuart described the earth as being rich and unctuous and containing a high volume of charcoal. Amongst the finds were two quern stones, a broken urn, ox bones, a quantity of smooth pebbles and a large bead.

Souterrains occur throughout Scotland, although there are definite clusters in Fife, Perthshire and Angus ( F T Wainwright's 'Southern Pictland'), Aberdeenshire, the Moray Firth estuary, the Western Isles, Caithness and Sutherland, and the Northern Isles. Evidence from excavated sites suggests that the more northerly

examples are earlier than the more southerly counterparts, dating to the late centuries BC while the more southerly sites tend to date from the early centuries AD. In form, Culsh is a typical example of the Aberdeenshire group, regarded by Wainwright as possessing qualities from both the Angus and Sutherland groups (ie the crescentic form, but smaller and less developed as encountered in the northerly sites).

Given that there is such wide variation in size, form and date throughout Scotland, it is highly unlikely that all souterrains fulfilled the same purpose. However, they may have played a role in storage as their even temperature and the stillness of air makes them ideal for storing grain or other agricultural produce. A ritual dimension to their use may be guessed at through the inclusion of cupmarked stones in the fabric of many sites.

### Artistic/Architectural Overview

Considerable skill and labour would have been required to construct a souterrain such as Culsh, which is in effect a long curving trench cut into the side of a hill with drystone walls lining its sides. The walls rest on a basal course of massive boulders while the uppermost courses are corbelled inwards to support the roof of massive flat slabs. Originally, small pinning stones were used extensively to hold the drystone walls in place, although these are now mortared. Professor Stuart noted that the original floor was bedrock, though some examples have paved floors.

### Social Overview

A lack of any formal study means that it is impossible to ascertain the present social significance of the monument. However, the monument features in several popular archaeological guides and 'New Age' spirituality websites, many of which argue the souterrain had a much greater ritual purpose than has been previously supposed.

Large numbers of souterrains exist throughout Scotland, and it is unlikely that they were signifiers of high status in antiquity, although possessing surplus produce may have brought added importance for the community or individual who made use of it.

### Spiritual Overview

No formal assessment can be made. The monument features on several 'New Age' spirituality websites.

The souterrain probably held some ritual significance for the Iron Age community living here, illustrated by the incorporation of two cupmarked stones into the walls, a feature often found in souterrains throughout Scotland. Assuming that the monument was used as a store for surplus produce, it may have played a role in ceremonies celebrating events in the farming year such as planting crops or the harvest.

## Aesthetic Overview

Culsh is one of the most complete monuments of its type in Aberdeenshire and, despite having mortared walls, it offers visitors an excellent opportunity to appreciate an intact and relatively unaltered souterrain as well as the construction skills of its builders.

The interior of the souterrain is dark, cool and rather claustrophobic, the lintels of the passageway pressing the visitor toward the floor.

Surrounded by a modern agricultural landscape, there is a feeling of continuity as a place where farmers lived and worked in the Iron Age.

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Our understanding of the monument's date and function are largely defined through analogy, as the 1853 excavation was near total, removing any archaeological layers from within the souterrain.

It is not known whether the monument was deliberately infilled after its abandonment or whether the soil within the souterrain trickled through gaps in the roofing slabs over the 1700 years prior to John Stuart's excavation.

Comparison with other excavated souterrain sites such as Ardestie and Carlungie suggests that settlement remains probably survive near the monument. However, their presence and extent remains unknown.

The location of the finds is not known.

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

The completeness of Culsh souterrain presents the public with a good example of this type of monument, this being one of the small number that can be safely accessed.

By analogy with excavated sites, it is very likely that the souterrain was attached to a settlement, possibly built in its curve.

Culsh was an early example of chemical analysis being used to learn more about the site.

The stillness of the air and the even temperatures within the souterrain suggests a role as a store for agricultural produce, though the incorporation of a cupmarked stone may indicate that the site had some unknown ritual or spiritual function.

### Associated Properties

**Rennibister, Grain, Ardestie, Carlungie and Tealing souterrains** (larger, more developed monuments, showing evidence of associated settlements); New Kinnord, Aberdeenshire (a group of hut-circles and souterrains); North Gellan, Aberdeenshire (unenclosed settlement and field system, situated approximately 2.5km NE).

Keywords souterrain; earth-house; eirde-house; Iron Age; cupmark; drystone walls, settlement.