



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KNOWE OF UNSTAN CHAMBERED CAIRN



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KNOWE OF UNSTAN CHAMBERED CAIRN

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The monument (also known as Unstan, or Knowe of Onstan) comprises a neolithic chambered 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. Situated towards the end of a promontory that juts into the Loch of Stenness on Mainland Orkney, it has excellent views across the Loch to other broadly contemporary monuments.

First investigated in 1884 with further excavation in the 1930s, the tomb was eventually covered with a concrete roof in 1949. Visitors enter through the original (re-roofed) entrance passage, which is at right angles to the main chamber. The chamber is subdivided by four pairs of upright stone slabs, with a small side cell set within the wall opposite the entrance. The round cairn is tightly enclosed by a modern fence and is accessed down a short pathway from a small carpark.

1.2 Statement of significance

- Type-site for one of the most important types of early neolithic pottery in the British Isles.
- A well preserved neolithic tomb which, in incorporating both interior stalls and a side cell, bears characteristics of both of the major tomb-types identified in the 'classic' categorisation of Orkney tombs.
- Important component of visible prehistoric landscape around the scenic Lochs of Stenness and Harray area, a part of which is a WHS.
- 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.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

2.2 Evidential values

- By analogy with other sites, this tomb likely dates to between 3500 and 2500 BC.
- Archaeologically-speaking this is a very famous site: Unstan is the type-site for a pottery style with a widespread distribution in northern Scotland, part of the wider round-based neolithic bowl tradition of the British Isles. The 1884 explorations produced remarkable quantities of this well-preserved and distinctive round-based pottery, along with other styles. Sherds from at least 30 vessels were represented, including many decorated examples.
- Skeletal remains (both disarticulated, and crouched burials), pottery and several flint implements provide important evidence into the

rituals associated with the treatment of human remains at such burial places over extended periods of time.

- Three samples of human remain were radiocarbon dated to around 3350 – 3100 cal BC.
- In addition to considerable modern graffiti, the tomb contains a number of carvings, the date of which is the subject of some interest and debate. On balance it seems that two runic inscriptions are modern (i.e. post-dating the excavations of 1884) and can perhaps be traced to a phase of modern Orcadian interest in runic inscriptions that post-dates the discovery of the Maeshowe runes. An incised 'bird' existed prior to 1935, and perhaps has some parallels in Pictish art elsewhere, but may again post-date 1884. The words 'Pictish marks' are obviously modern and can be inferred to date between 1884 and 1935. Visitors are reminded that today, the carving of graffiti is forbidden by law.
- This particular type of cairn is found in north and west Scotland.

2.3 Historical values

- 1884 excavated by Robert Stewart Clouston and left open to the elements.
- 1934 passed into guardianship; further clearance by the Ministry of Works.
- 1949 roofed and made accessible to public. Consolidation works are known to have included the replacement of the side cell lintel, and reconstruction of the walling above.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

- In its form, this tomb is a fairly rare example of an intermediate between what archaeologists call the 'Orkney-Cromarty' type of chambered cairn (a cairn with stalled chambers) and the 'Maeshowe-type' tomb (a circular cairn with cells leading from a central main chamber). This characteristic is shared with the tomb at Isbister.
- In the two end compartments at a height of approximately 1.2m, stones project from the side walls. These likely supported a shelf or horizontal division.
- Options considered for conservation included placing a protective structure over the whole tomb, as at Midhowe. The concrete roof is a late example of the trends adopted in the 1930s on Rousay. 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, so too the unusual management issues that arise from this in the present through the growth of green algae in the interiors of the monuments.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

- While the profile of the turf-covered mound is modern, and results from its 20th century roof and associated interventions, its distinctive form is visible for a considerable distance around the Loch of Stenness, part of a National Scenic Area.
- Unstan is inter-visible with many other prehistoric sites. Although sited beyond the Inner Buffer Zone of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site, key elements of this site, notably the Ring of Brogar and its associated mounds, are inter-visible. Note too, inter-visibility with Ness of Brodgar.
- 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.
- The tightness of the fence around the site and the funnel-like approach does little to enhance appreciation of its landscape setting.

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.
- Nothing is known of the activity in the immediate vicinity of this tomb or the community with which it is associated; the presence of two projecting walls should be noted, for instance. The hypothesis that each tomb may have been associated with a nearby settlement (as at Maes Howe, Quanterness, Cuween Hill and Wideford Hill) could be tested through new fieldwork.
- Little is known of the scheduled promontory fort adjacent to and visible from Unstan.
- In complement to the work of the Rising Tide Submerged Archaeology Project, further clarity could be achieved on the changing landscape setting of the site.
- As with some other Orkney PIC, there are various spellings of the site, a subject that can be of heated local interest. A specialist report drawing together the evidence for the various names would be helpful.

4 **Associated properties**

Chambered cairns of **Mid Howe, Blackhammer, Knowe of Yarso**, Isbister; **Maeshowe, Wideford Hill, Cuween Hill, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray**, and the **Dwarfie Stane**. Proximity to ritual monuments that comprise the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS is particularly important, e.g. **Ring of Brodgar, Barnhouse Stone, Watch Stone** and **Stones of Stenness**; also the many scheduled and unscheduled sites in this area including Barnhouse and the Ness of Brodgar. For neolithic house forms, **Knap of Howar, Skara Brae** and **Links of Noltland**. Finds from the excavations, including some skeletal remains, are in the National Museums of Scotland.

5 **Keywords**

neolithic, chambered cairn, Orkney-Cromarty (stalled)/Maeshowe-type, chamber, Unstan ware pottery, burials, graffiti, runic inscriptions, bird, 'Pictish marks'

