

**The Heart of
Neolithic Orkney
World Heritage Site
Research Agenda**

The Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site Research Agenda

Edited by
Jane Downes, Sally M Foster and C R Wickham-Jones
with Jude Callister

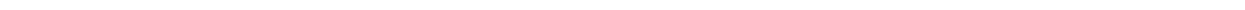
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As advisers to the World Heritage Committee, ICOMOS has drawn up guidelines for the management of World Heritage Sites and for research programmes to promote and co-ordinate research in the area. In Orkney this important task has been carried out with the contribution of a number of partners. It has been a collaborative venture involving many experts who have generously given freely of their time. I know that Historic Scotland has been delighted to support the Orkney College UHI in organising and co-ordinating the production of this Research Agenda for Scotland's first archaeological World Heritage Site, The Heart of Neolithic Orkney.

We very much hope that this Research Agenda will prove a model for Site managers throughout the world, as well as others dealing with the challenges and opportunities of their local archaeological inheritance elsewhere in Scotland.

Patricia Ferguson

Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport

Dedicated to Daphne Home Lorimer,
prime mover in the setting up of
Orkney Archaeological Trust
and Chairman of the Trust
1996-2004

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Foreword

The Orkney World Heritage Site is indeed one of the glories of prehistory, not just of Scottish or of British prehistory, but of world prehistory. There can be few places more numinous than the walkway between the Loch of Harray and the Loch of Stenness, with the Stones of Stenness on one side, with the Ring of Brodgar in prospect, and with the most perfect of Neolithic tombs, Maeshowe, only a few hundred metres away. It is always a pleasure to celebrate these remarkable monuments and their numerous counterparts elsewhere in the Orkney Islands.

This splendid volume is, however, very much more than a simple celebration. It sets out to use the impetus offered by the status of 'World Heritage Site' in a very active way. Of course it considers fully the various problems offered by the management of what we now increasingly realise to be a priceless heritage. But it does more than that. It seeks ways of understanding more fully just what that heritage is, and of promoting the wider dissemination of that understanding.

For the archaeologist, Neolithic Orkney is one of the wonders of the ancient world. It is quite exceptional anywhere, and without parallel in Europe, to be able to visit the well preserved settlement sites, like Skara Brae and the Knap of Howar, and then wonderful funerary monuments, like Midhowe or Quoyness or Isbister, and then to go on to view these in a landscape in which the great central monuments, including the Ring of Brodgar, become increasingly intelligible to us in their contemporary setting. For the pace of discovery is considerable. Today, through the revelations of the settlement at

Barnhouse, we understand very much more than we did 30 years ago when I was excavating at Quanterness and investigating the Ring of Brodgar and Maeshowe.

And as this admirable Agenda so clearly indicates, our understanding of the World Heritage Site is enriched and amplified by our increased knowledge of the Orkney Islands as a whole at that period. The discovery and excavation of new settlement sites, and their thoughtful integration into a more ambitious notion of the Neolithic landscape holds the promise of a much more comprehensive and coherent view of Neolithic Orkney. There is a potential for further research here which is very well outlined in this report. It is admirably open-ended and invites both the intelligent amplification of what we already know and the acquisition of new knowledge.

The report has a second great merit. It recognises fully that although it is the great monuments of the so-called 'Neolithic' period that first attract us to the World Heritage Site, that Site and its landscape, like any land that has been lived and worked and loved for 6,000 years, is a palimpsest. That is to say it is an overlay: a record of the life and work of more than a 100 generations of Orcadians. It carries the traces of the first visitors to Orkney in the Mesolithic period. It has burials and settlements of the still (to us) rather obscure Bronze Age life of Orkney which succeeded the great floruit of the Neolithic period. With the brochs of the Iron Age and then the Pictish settlements we have a new period of abundant evidence which is soon succeeded by the Norse settlements and their Scottish successors. There are

ample indications of these phases within the World Heritage Area itself. But again it is to the Orkney Islands as a whole that one has to look to obtain a fully diachronic view, and to discern the full richness of what the great Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown described as the tapestry of the past of Orkney.

This remarkable book is more than simply a 'research agenda', generously grant-aided by Historic Scotland, the Orkney Islands Council and Orkney Heritage Society, with support from Orkney College UHI. In the first place it is an up-to-date review of the state not only of the World Heritage Site itself but of archaeology and of the historic heritage in Orkney today. To realise so comprehensively the vision that the true heritage encompasses the whole of Orkney is already an important contribution. Any management plan has to be concerned not only with the physical integrity of the great sites in guardianship but with the remarkable totality of the historic resource which Orkney offers. By considering not only the research techniques which are

available in a very systematic way but also the theoretical perspectives which may be developed to inform such research, it offers an encouraging exemplar. Themes of cultural identity and of social construction are developed here in an admirably pragmatic way. For sometimes in theoretical archaeology the theory is at a rather abstract level which does not quite engage with the practicalities of day-to-day archaeological research. Here the theory has been brought to bear upon the rich available data for early Orkney with the promise of generating further relevant data, and hence new conclusions and perhaps even new theory. This is cutting-edge research. I predict that it will be used quite widely, far beyond Orkney, as a model of how such issues should be tackled. The archaeology of Orkney is a research field of quite exceptional richness, by international as well as national standards. It is well served by this refreshing appraisal.

Colin Renfrew

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Acronyms

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| AD | After Christ |
| AHRCC | Archaeological and Historical Research Co-ordination Committee |
| AMS | Accelerator mass spectrometry |
| BC | Before Christ |
| BP | Before present |
| ¹⁴ C | (dating) radiocarbon |
| DNA | Deoxyribonucleic acid |
| EM | Electromagnetic conductivity |
| EMEC | European Marine Energy Centre |
| FOAT | Friends of Orkney Archaeological Trust |
| GIS | Geographical information systems |
| GPR | Ground penetrating radar |
| HLA | Historic Landuse Assessment |
| HS | Historic Scotland |
| IBZ | Inner Buffer Zone |
| ICOMOS | International Committee on Monuments and Sites |
| IFA | Institute of Field Archaeologists |
| OAT | Orkney Archaeological Trust |
| OBZ | Outer Buffer Zone |
| OIC | Orkney Islands Council |
| OSL | (dating) Optical stimulated luminescence |
| PIC | Property in Care |
| LCA | Landscape Character Assessment |
| NMRS | National Monuments Record of Scotland |
| NMS | National Museums of Scotland |
| RCAHMS | Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland |
| SNH | Scottish Natural Heritage |
| SMR | Sites and Monuments Record |
| TL | Thermoluminescence |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| WH | World Heritage |
| WHA | World Heritage Area |
| WHS | World Heritage Site |
| WHAGP | World Heritage Area Geophysics Programme |
| WWI | World War One |
| WWII | World War Two |
| ZVI | Zones of visual influence |