



Book Reviews

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEOLITHIC HOUSE SOCIETIES IN ORKNEY EDITED BY COLIN RICHARDS AND RICHARD JONES

Windgather Press; 512pp; 436 illustrations inc colour plates; 126 tables; hb, ISBN 978-1-90968-689-2; £35

This is an outstanding volume. It presents the results of the Cuween-Wideford Landscape Project on Mainland Orkney, which investigates evidence for Neolithic occupation, and is rich in primary research and the kinds of details only fieldwork can reveal. This, in turn, is combined with clear theoretical analyses that offer a penetrating and insightful discussion of the development of society on Orkney through the Neolithic. Organised around the increasingly popular theme of house societies (more of which below) it offers not only the clarity of reporting one wishes for from excavation reports, but an overall argument about the specific developmental histories of this place at this time. Once more Orkney reveals that it has much to tell us about its Neolithic, despite the long histories of excavation and publication that have already taken place.

Beginning in 1994 the Cuween-Wideford Landscape Project examines the Bay of Firth area on Mainland Orkney. Investigating a series of occupation and settlement sites, the area offers an important contrast to the ever popular sites around the Stenness-Brodgar complex just a few kilometres away. This volume presents the work to date, and is made up of 16 chapters. The first nine deal with the project overall, including its excavations and conclusions, whilst the remaining seven set out the detailed reports on radiocarbon dating, materials of various kinds and the environmental evidence secured. Whilst space precludes covering all the chapters in as much detail as I would like, I do want to discuss each of the first nine chapters individually to give the reader a sense of the breadth of the excavations and their conclusions. I will then briefly touch on the remaining chapters before turning to the volume's substantial themes.

The volume begins by introducing us to the project, its history and the landscape itself. This also includes an introduction to the idea, critical throughout the volume, that Neolithic Orkney represented the development of emerging 'house societies'. This concept, drawn from Claude Lévi-Strauss' anthropological analysis, argues that in these forms of society the idea of the house (as much as its physical form) represents a critical locus for dynamic social relations. This notion, dynamically employed as a way of describing social processes, rather than as an anthropological archetype, is employed throughout the volume to write a different kind of history for these developing communities.

The second chapter sets out the investigations of settlements at Wideford Hill, tracing the transition from wood to stone architecture, a pattern that the volume as a whole reveals to be widespread across Orkney. Notable discoveries here, to this reader at least, include the deposition of substantial amounts of charred grain within a posthole of one of the timber structures, and the continuity in the use of hearths from one phase of a building to another. Perhaps the most significant argument to emerge in this chapter, however, again one to which the volume returns, is that the stone houses from the Early Neolithic (most famously known from the Knap of Howar) are later than previously thought, perhaps dating to after 3300 cal BC. This inverts traditional arguments that stalled cairns derived from the forms of houses, and would mean that houses themselves derive from the burial monuments. Given the centrality of houses to our understanding of Neolithic Orkney (with or without a 'house society' model) this has critical implications.

Chapter 3 describes the excavation of an Early Neolithic stone house at Knowes of Trotty. Highlights here include a substantial paved drain, an amazing pottery kiln, and an important emphasis that the house required regular patching and rebuilding. This latter point should challenge any easy equation between stone houses and a sense of automatic, rather than achieved, permanence.

Chapter 4 sets out the sites at the Brae of Smerquoy, including Smerquoy Hoose, and the possibility of at least two earlier timber buildings nearby, following a similar sequence identified at Wideford Hill in Chapter 2. These latter excavations are on-going, so the chapter focuses on the Smerquoy Hoose itself and reveal a number of interesting features. These include a decorated stone, and a wonderfully complex sequence of drainage networks, which hint at the way in which materials like water flowed into and out of the house at different times.

Chapter 5 explores a series of closely located sites nearby to the famous Cuween chambered cairn. The first, Stonehall Knoll, revealed a sequence of stone houses, with two earlier ones, and a later example constructed in the final centuries of the fourth millennium BC. A sequence of houses was also revealed at the second location of Stonehall Meadow where one house was built and then replaced by another, which in turn was paired with a third. The final site discussed, Stonehall Farm, featured another fourth millennium house replaced by later Neolithic occupation discussed in the next chapter. The changing forms of architecture at these sites supports the book's wider argument for reversing the traditional notion that stalled cairns were modelled on houses. Instead the addition of orthostats demonstrates it was houses that were becoming more like tombs and not the other way around.

Chapter 6 picks up the story of Stonehall Farm and takes it into the Late Neolithic. The project here revealed not only the fourth millennium activity discussed above but also excavated two Late Neolithic buildings, of several in existence at the site. The first of these, Structure 1, saw its hearth replaced by a stone cist later in its use life, perhaps changing its role within the small village, whilst House 1 represented a more standard Late Neolithic structure, with similarities to those in the later phases of Skara Brae. Perhaps the most interesting part of the chapter, however, comes in the detailed discussion of the midden that surrounded the houses. Here the exploration focuses on the complexity of this substance, of the interleaving and interweaving flows of material that make it up and the processes of decay and deposition that brought it into being. This discussion has wide implications for our conceptions of the role of midden material across Orkney, and indeed more widely.

Chapter 7 sets out the evidence from Crossiecrown. Here early structures were dismantled and replaced by two later buildings christened the Red House and the Grey House after the discovery that clay was used, in the former case at least, as plaster to decorate and colour the walls.

Chapter 8 moves away from settlement evidence to explore the dead buried close to the Crossiecrown sites at Quanterness and Ramberry Head. The former needs no introduction as one of the more famous Passage Graves on Orkney, and it is certainly welcome to see the material it contained getting further examination here. As is often the case with modern re-analysis, the minimum number of individuals has dropped significantly from the original calculation of 157 to the 59 cited in this report. Ramberry Head by contrast is a new site, excavated by the project after ploughing revealed its existence in 2005. This was made up of a ring cairn, with cremated bones dating to the middle of the second millennium BC and a passage 'structure' of Late Neolithic/ Bronze Age date. The team offer a nuanced and rich reading of the materials employed in the construction of both sites.

Chapter 9 acts as the summary and conclusions to the report on the excavations themselves, and the broader claims made throughout the volume. It includes a sophisticated discussion of the way in which stalled cairns may have acted as points of access to other worlds, an argument which allows the authors to sensitively explore their landscape setting. The chapter then brings together the history of house societies on Orkney, teasing out the growth in nucleated

settlements (like Barnhouse) towards the end of the fourth millennium BC and the emergence of big houses at their centre through the Late Neolithic. The narrative is compelling, and interweaves ideas of mythology with an active and agentive sense of architecture, including passage graves and stone circles, and materiality, both in the form of exotic artefacts and the emergence of Grooved Ware. Even in this chapter these arguments are enhanced by the results of other excavations, in this case at Muckquoy where yet further potential evidence of Neolithic settlement has been detected.

Following this the volume contains seven other chapters. Chapter 10, by Seren Griffiths, features a collection and modelling of radiocarbon dates from across Orkney. This is an exceedingly helpful chapter, although a little more integration of the dates from the sites discussed in this volume in each of the chapters individually might have been useful. Indeed, one criticism of the volume as a whole might be that many of the sites might have benefited from wider use of radiocarbon dating and Bayesian modelling to open up more detailed understandings of the rhythms of occupation, use and abandonment at each site. Chapter 11 sets out a thorough and enormously detailed discussion of the pottery recovered from the excavations, including thin section analysis, raw material studies and so on. Chapter 12 deals with the lithics, Chapter 13 the coarse stone tools, Chapter 14 the animal bones, Chapter 15 the environmental evidence and Chapter 16 soil micromorphology. Each is handled with care and dedication, and provide useful resources for other studies moving forward. Indeed, the specialist reports as a whole are a model of detailed attention across each of the sites that support and enhance the narratives of the main excavation chapters dealt with above.

What then of the argument of the book as a whole? The central contention is that Neolithic Orkney can be understood as a history of house societies. As outlined in Chapter 9 especially these emerged in the middle of the fourth millennium BC, became increasingly nucleated and reached their peak in the settlement under a single roof at Skara Brae, and the extraordinary architecture at the Ness of Brodgar. I must confess that when I began this volume I was something of a house society sceptic. Do we really need *another* ethnographic analogy to come in and explain the Neolithic of Britain? Indeed, given the growth in popularity of the house society model as explanation of the Neolithic across Britain and Europe, would this approach really add to our understanding of the kinds of wonderful difference that Orkney so clearly represents? By the time I finished reading the volume I had become, if not precisely converted, then at least sympathetic to this approach. The key thing, as the authors emphasise throughout, is not to approach 'house societies' as a static social type, but rather to recognise it as a way of describing certain sets of relationships that flow through and constitute communities-with-houses. This emphasis on the relational aspects of societies-in-the-making ties in with wider trends in archaeological thought that emphasise the role of substances and materials, as this volume shows in its discussions of the midden materials at Stonehall Farm or the make-up of the passage structure at Ramberry Head. Indeed, at times the question becomes what precisely is gained by the house society approach above and beyond these other, less anthropologically dependent, approaches. Nonetheless, the historical narrative for Orkney that the authors construct through an attention to house societies is certainly persuasive, and this is what really matters. Whether or not we might use this approach in other contexts is less important. We do not need to embrace house societies elsewhere to note that this volume provides us with a way of telling histories that embrace people and things through an emphasis on the processes that both are caught up with and out of which both emerged. Whilst the risk of lurching back to seeing house societies as type rather than process remains real, the authors here show that the rewards, in this case at least, outweigh the dangers.

Overall this report represents a genuinely outstanding contribution to our knowledge of Neolithic Orkney. Richly illustrated and written in an engaging fashion it marks a significant moment in our understanding of these complex landscapes. Its strengths come in part because it draws on the kind of extended excavation projects that are increasingly hard to do in a world demanding the swift production of high-ranking outputs on a regular basis. In contrast, this report speaks to the value of attending to place, attending to materials, and combining this with cutting-edge theory and detailed specialist analysis. It makes a monumental contribution to our understanding of Neolithic Orkney, which,

whilst it might never have been Britain's Ancient Capital as a certain BBC documentary might have us believe, remains a place unparalleled in these islands at this time.

Oliver Harris

University of Leicester

Review submitted: March 2017

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor