



Book Reviews

THE NESS OF BRODGAR: AS IT STANDS, EDITED BY NICK CARD, MARK EDMONDS AND ANNE MITCHELL

University of the Highlands and Islands Archaeology Institute Research Series 3, The Orcadian (Kirkwall Press), Kirkwall. 2020. 380pp, 319 figs (268 colour), 31 tables; pb, ISBN 978-1912 88908-2, £35.99

From time to time, and perhaps this is an experience that has been heightened by a year of lockdown due to Covid-19, one has the pleasure of opening a brown cardboard book package that has just landed on the doormat. However, it is rare that such a beautiful volume as this lies within. Hardcover, attractively designed, with over 250 colour images and a ribbon bookmark: in short, a feast. *The Ness of Brodgar: As It Stands* is just what the title implies, an interim volume detailing the results of excavations so far at the Ness of Brodgar on Orkney, setting out knowledge about the site as it currently stands.

Most readers will be familiar with the extraordinary site of the Ness of Brodgar, where excavations have been taking place each year since its discovery in 2003. The site lies on a narrow peninsula of land between the lochs of Harray and Stenness, at the centre of the famous Stenness-Brodgar complex of Neolithic monuments, including the Ring of Brodgar, the Stones of Stenness, Maeshowe and Barnhouse settlement. The compelling story of the discovery of the site, which was 'hidden in plain sight' is told in Chapter 2, including the resulting 'eureka' moment when it was realised that much of the isthmus between the two lochs was artificial, being made up of Neolithic structures, occupation debris and middens.

Since the discovery, excavations have revealed a stone-built complex of at least 36 structures, with many more lying outside and beneath the area so far explored. As Mitchell describes in Chapter 24, excavations have taken place during annual seasons by a community of archaeologists, with the project led by professionals employed initially by the Orkney Archaeological Trust, and later by Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology, part of the University of Highlands and Islands, who have published this volume. They have been assisted by a huge team of volunteers and students, who converge on 'the Ness' each summer to lend their support to the project and work to unpick the extraordinary archaeology. The impact on the local community cannot be under-estimated; around 18,000 people each year visit the site and the project has a considerable impact on Orkney's tourism industry.

The publication of this handsome volume is therefore much to be welcomed, providing for the first time a detailed description of discoveries at the Ness of Brodgar. It might seem premature to publish such a monograph before the end of a research project, and some of the specialist reports are necessarily preliminary, but as the site is well known and so much work has already been done, the decision is more than justified. Sadly in 2020 the summer excavation season had to be cancelled for obvious reasons, but this did allow the project directors to dedicate their time to writing this book; a silver lining.

As the authors explain at the end of the introductory Chapter 1, the volume is both a review of research so far, but also sets out an agenda for work to come. The volume is scholarly and academic, with plans and descriptions of each structure, explanations of the sequence of the site and current interpretations, various specialist chapters with tables of data, and full referencing throughout. Yet the volume also manages to remain entirely accessible and readable, with beautifully written text and stunning images. The superb photographs, many of them full-page bleeds, provide colour and atmosphere throughout the book, all carefully chosen to show relevant details or provide context. Those by Jim Richardson and Woody Musgrove deserve special mention. There are many excellent plans and annotated vertical photographs throughout, although it would have been good for the overall phased plan of the main trench (Fig. 4.6) to have been larger, as it provides a key reference point, and a figures list would also have been helpful.

The book comprises 27 chapters that can be divided into four parts: an introduction; a detailed description of the site; the specialist reports; and the wider context both in prehistory and today. The introductory chapters briefly describe the geographic and cultural setting of the Ness of Brodgar, detail the antiquarian records and history of the area, tell the story of the discovery of the site in 2003, and set out the broader research context and questions that the project hopes to answer. Chapter 4 provides crucial information about trench locations and the overall chronology of the site. Although this sequence and the radiocarbon dates presented will satisfy the casual reader, the dates are not well integrated into the main text, and those with a more specialist interest in chronology would be better off referring to the previously published paper, which formed part of the *Times of Our Lives* project (Card *et al.* 2018). Another 42 radiocarbon determinations have been obtained since this work, and although these are listed in Appendix 1, unfortunately most do not have detailed contextual and stratigraphic information; presumably, these will be made available in future publications. It is difficult to know if these new dates will have a major effect on the main sequence, although they do appear to provide more precise dating for the remodelling of Structure 12, and the dates from the midden mound in Trench T would allow deposition activity here to be modelled.

The second part of the book comprises a detailed description of the site as excavated so far, working roughly chronologically from early buildings, the site boundaries, the later pierced buildings, the middens and finally, the late buildings. All the structures were constructed of tight courses of carefully selected blocks and slabs, usually with double-skinned walls and central hearths, and many of these walls still stand tall. These buildings were built, altered, dismantled and rebuilt on many occasions, making disentangling the sequence no easy task for the excavators. Nevertheless, a clear sequence has been elucidated, from smaller earlier buildings with orthostatic divisions and roofs of organic material, to the building of monumental hall-like structures with substantial stone piers supporting stone slate roofs. Painstaking archaeological work has shown that each building had multiple floor surfaces, and experienced many instances of repair, alteration, collapse and rebuilding, alongside prolonged and intensive occupation, including episodes of mass cooking for large numbers of people.

Objects including polished stone spatulas, collections of animal bones, occasional human bones, polished axeheads, a carved stone ball and complete Grooved Ware pots were deliberately placed within the buildings either as foundation deposits during construction, or as closing deposits at the final use. In between, the structures appear to have been kept clean of debris despite their intensive use. Most of the buildings were arranged around a central paved courtyard area with a small standing stone at the centre. The structures were separated from the rest of the peninsula by a substantial stone boundary wall to the north, up to 6 m wide, and a less substantial wall to the south. Beyond this latter wall was an enormous midden mound, at least 4 m deep and 70 m in diameter, itself partly covering earlier buildings, including the unusually large and well-made Structure 27. Alongside Structure 5, an elongated building at the opposite end of the excavated area, it may be one of the earliest buildings uncovered at the Ness of Brodgar so far. It is this early phase of the occupation of the Ness peninsula that is currently the least well understood due to the nature of archaeological investigation; targeted excavations and further post-excavation analysis over the next few years will hopefully provide further clarity on this crucial early period.

The third section of the volume comprises 13 specialist reports on particular categories of artefact (roof slates, decorated stone, foreign stone, flaked stone, stone tools, maceheads and pottery), ecofact (animal bones, fish bones, marine shells, human remains, archaeobotanical evidence, charcoal) and scientific techniques (micromorphology, geochemical analysis and magnetic dating). Some quite astonishing statistics demonstrate the scale of the post-excavation task – over 90,000 sherds of Grooved Ware, over 72,000 flaked stone artefacts and more than 900 decorated stones, the largest group of markings from any single Neolithic site in northern Europe. This material will provide research projects for many years to come! Nevertheless, the preliminary analysis and pilot studies presented already have some interesting results.

Residue analysis of the pottery suggests that people were cooking beef and dairy products, evidence supported by the large numbers of cattle bones (85% of the assemblage), alongside much smaller numbers of sheep, pig and red deer. The decorated stone assemblage has been expertly analysed by Thomas, who shows that the abstract geometric and linear motifs were often faintly incised and built into walls where they could not be seen; the purpose of creating such art was not necessarily for display. Pigments of red, white and black were also used to colour selected stones, and these same colours were also used to decorate pots. Analysis shows that stones for building and making tools were being brought from varied parts of Orcadian archipelago. There are also hints of connections with places further away – pitchstone from Isle of Arran, maceheads of Lewisian gneiss and small quantities of Den of Boddam flint cobbles from Aberdeenshire. As Anderson-Whymark explains, the pitchstone had been worked using a type of blade manufacture not normally found on Orkney, suggesting that long-distance travellers brought this material with them to the Ness of Brodgar.

The use of innovative techniques such as geochemical analysis of floor deposits using XRF, archaeomagnetic dating of hearth deposits and pottery, careful and detailed analysis of the geology of stones and digital spatial modelling of the bone deposit from Structure 10, are beginning to build up a detailed picture of the use of space and the different activities carried out, as well as resource exploitation. Many of the new research techniques have been conducted initially as part of post-graduate research projects, including Ackerman's work on roofing slates, McKenzie's soil analysis, Johnson's work on foreign stone, Harris's work on archaeomagnetic dating and Ayres' contribution to the animal bones chapter. It is brilliant to see such an important excavation being used as a testbed to develop new techniques both in the field and the laboratory, and acting as a training ground for the next generation of specialists. The most exciting part of the analysis lies ahead, as all this data is integrated and interpreted together.

The Ness of Brodgar was clearly a major central place in later Neolithic Orkney. It was a place where people gathered to build, to display and to take part in feasts and ceremonies. There is evidence that the number of dwellings occupied across the rest of Orkney dropped significantly during the peak of occupation at the Ness; it seems that energy was focused on constructing both monuments and buildings within the Stenness-Brodgar complex instead (Bayliss *et al.* 2017), even if these were not places occupied on a year-round basis. More focus on this local context, including comparison with activity at other Neolithic settlements such as Barnhouse and the Links of Noltland, would have been welcome and hopefully this will be a focus for future analysis and interpretation. The final chapters of the volume do widen in focus, but to more distant places, with contributions from Parker Pearson on the perspective from Salisbury Plain in southern Britain, and Cooney and Carlin providing a view from across the Irish Sea. Both highlight the difficulties of creating comparative chronologies and the diversity of regional social practices, but they also

provide contrasting standpoints. Cooney and Carlin set out their frustrations with currently favoured explanations for the interconnectedness of clusters of ceremonial monuments across Britain and Ireland, with the idea that travelling hierarchical elites were competing to exchange and display exotic goods viewed as inadequate in explaining the entangled relations between places, people and objects during the Neolithic. Parker Pearson, on the other hand, is happier to write about competing kin groups, competition for land and alliance formation, although he does draw out aspects of the cosmological significance of the 'natural' landscapes that gradually emerge as the locations for monument complexes. As the evidence continues to emerge from the Ness of Brodgar, and interpretations are refined over the coming years, these will contribute directly to these key debates about the structure and connections of Neolithic societies.

The Ness of Brodgar was a central place in the late Neolithic and has become so again in the 21st century, at least for archaeological and Orcadian communities. This superbly produced book, which any archaeologist should be proud to have on their bookcase or coffee table, stands as a testament to the hard-work and dedication of the core archaeological team, as well as the hundreds of volunteers and students who have contributed to the study of this astonishing place. The volume has set a high standard for the publication of archaeological research in a scholarly, accessible, and timely manner. Bravo!

References

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