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ANTIQUITY
a review of world archaeology



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Journal:	<i>Antiquity</i>
Manuscript ID	AQY-RE-16-171
Manuscript Type:	Research
Date Submitted by the Author:	25-Aug-2016
Complete List of Authors:	Bayliss, Alex; Historic England, Scientific Dating Marshall, Peter; Historic England, Scientific Dating Richards, Colin; University of Highlands and Islands, Archaeology Institute Whittle, Alasdair; Cardiff University, Archaeology and Conservation
Keywords:	Orkney, Late Neolithic, settlement, Bayesian modelling
Research Region:	Britain & Ireland

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The Late Neolithic timescape of Orkney: islands of history

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Late Neolithic Orkney

Orkney is rightly famed for the exceptional quality and preservation of its Neolithic archaeology. House walls stand higher than a person's head, and chambers in tombs display outstanding masonry skill. The diversity of evidence is also striking, from settlements to chambered tombs, stone circles and their quarries. There is varied material culture, especially in the Late Neolithic, with the presence of Grooved Ware pottery and a wide array of stone objects, including stone balls and maceheads. New discoveries continue, not only on small, outlying and previously neglected islands, such as of the settlement of Braes of Ha'Breck, on Wyre (Thomas & Lee 2012), but also in areas long trodden, such as of the settlement complexes of Barnhouse (Richards 2005), Ness of Brodgar (Towers *et al.* 2015), and Bookan in western Mainland (Christopher Gee, *pers. comm.*). The Ness of Brodgar has further enriched the archaeological record with its abundance of impressive buildings, wealth of interior fittings and incised and painted decoration (Card & Thomas 2012). Not for nothing was the 'Heart of Neolithic Orkney' granted World Heritage status in 1999 (Downes *et al.* 2013).

The stone houses grouped in settlements, and the monuments, which together define the Orcadian Neolithic, also provide opportunities for following trajectories of change at the local and even household level of social interaction. Previous research charted the gradual development of a process of settlement nucleation beginning with small-scale dispersed settlements in the mid-fourth millennium cal BC, with round-based pottery. **By the later fourth and into the third millennia cal BC larger conglomaterated settlements appear, with Grooved Ware; towards** the end of the Neolithic sequence, there are juxtaposed larger houses, later Grooved Ware and in some cases Beaker pottery (Richards & R. Jones 2016). Chambered tombs reached their peak of architectural sophistication and spatial complexity with Maeshowe passage graves (Davidson & Henshall 1989). Stone circles in the form of the Stones of Stenness and Ring of Brodgar appear to be innovations of the earlier and mid-third millennium cal BC (Richards 2013).

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Grooved Ware pottery emerged in the Late Neolithic, its flat-based forms supplanting a round-based repertoire (Cleal & MacSween 1999). One interpretation of the trajectory of social change was that the Late Neolithic saw the development of chiefdoms, following earlier segmentary societies (Renfrew 1979). Other accounts have stressed the complexity and diversity of the evidence, and have posited different models of social change at other scales with, among other features, an emphasis on community and great houses (Sharples 1985; Richards 2005; 2013; Richards & R. Jones 2016).

Through all this run fundamental questions of chronology: especially timings, durations and tempo. For how long were the Neolithic settlements inhabited and was this continuous? Can we date the different stages of settlement conglomeration through the Neolithic? Is there any consistency or concurrence in this process between settlements? Did the monumentality exemplified by Barnhouse and the Ness of Brodgar co-exist? When did Grooved Ware pottery emerge, and did its adoption coincide with the ending of previous bowl traditions? How quickly did it develop and change? When were Maeshowe passage graves built, and how do they relate to the **temporal trajectory of stalled chambered cairns?** When were the Orkney stone circles erected? Was the initiation of all these changes simultaneous, and what was the tempo of change through this period? Before we can attack big questions such as the nature of social formations and the appearance of monuments in Late Neolithic Orkney, we need critically to consider the nature of dwelling as represented by settlement histories, and that provides the focus of this paper. With the quantity and range of evidence now available come the possibilities of unravelling a more complicated sequence, specific site histories and the changing social circumstances they exemplify.

Scientific dating and Bayesian chronological modelling on Orkney

When Colin Renfrew started excavation of the chambered cairn at Quanterness in 1972, there was not a single radiocarbon date for the Neolithic sites of Orkney (Renfrew *et al.* 1976: 194). This situation quickly changed and, by the mid-1980s, over 80 radiocarbon measurements relating to Neolithic activity on eleven sites across the islands could be listed (Renfrew & Buteux 1985) and interpreted on a calibrated calendar timescale (Clark 1975).

Over the next fifteen years only small numbers of additional radiocarbon dates were obtained, and, at the turn of the millennium, Patrick Ashmore (2000) mustered a total of 119 radiocarbon dates from 18 sites in his synthesis of the chronology of Neolithic Orkney. This study relied on

the visual inspection of calibrated radiocarbon dates and summed probability distributions of groups of related calibrated dates from phases of activity on particular sites. The limitations of both approaches for inferring accurate chronologies of past activity have since become appreciated (Bayliss *et al.* 2007), although Ashmore's (1999) requirement for radiocarbon results on short-lived, single-entity samples and his emphasis on a critical assessment of the archaeological provenance of the dated material have substantially improved the utility of the dates obtained over the succeeding decades.

The 14 radiocarbon dates then available from the phase I and phase II settlements (Trench 1) at Skara Brae (Renfrew & Buteux 1985) formed the basis of one of the first case studies for the application of a Bayesian approach to interpreting chronology in archaeology (Buck *et al.* 1991). This approach combines calibrated radiocarbon dates, or other forms of scientific dating, with knowledge of the archaeological contexts from which they are derived to produce a series of formal, probabilistic date estimates. Stringent demands are made of both the radiocarbon dates and our archaeological understanding of stratigraphy, associations, sample taphonomy, and context in general, but the combined chronology should be both more reliable and more precise than its individual components, since it is reliant on multiple strands of reinforcing evidence (Bayliss & Whittle 2015).

Bayesian chronological modelling was not widely adopted for the Orcadian Neolithic at this time because there was a perception that Bayesian analysis could only provide refined chronologies where there was a deep sequence of direct stratigraphic relationships (Ashmore 1998: 142–145). Furthermore, in considering the chronology of Grooved Ware in Scotland, Ashmore (1998: 142) asserted that there was limited potential for refining the dating of its first occurrence, as the shape of the radiocarbon calibration curve means that results on short-lived samples actually dating to between 3300 BC and 3100 BC would calibrate to 'somewhere in the period 3400 to 3000 (or even 2900) cal BC.'

This view can now be challenged as a result of technical developments in both radiocarbon dating and the statistical modelling of dates over recent decades. Not only have the quoted errors on radiocarbon measurements approximately halved since Ashmore wrote, but it has become possible to date calcined bone (Lanting *et al.* 2001), and the potential for Bayesian statistics to provide refined chronologies on a routine basis, even in situations where stratigraphic sequences are limited, has become clearly apparent (Bayliss 2009). The increased precision that is now

available means that what in the 1990s was a undifferentiated plateau in the calibration curve for the late fourth millennium cal BC, now comes into focus as a series of micro-wiggles which can be employed as the basis for much more constrained chronologies (Reimer *et al.* 2013).

The potential of these **techniques to refine narratives of Neolithic Orkney** is now being exploited. Major programmes of new dating and analysis have been undertaken on the stalled cairn at the Holm of Papa Westray North (Ritchie 2009: 59–66) and the chambered tomb at Quanterness (Schulting *et al.* 2010). Recent work has also seen chronological modelling of Grooved Ware settlement sites at Pool, Sanday (MacSween *et al.* 2015), Barnhouse and Skara Brae, Mainland (Richards *et al.* 2016a; Clarke & Shepherd forthcoming), and preliminary models for Ness of Brodgar, Mainland (Card *et al.* in press) and the Links of Noltland, Westray (Clarke *et al.* submitted), where excavation is continuing. Further radiocarbon dates have also been obtained on samples of Orkney vole (*Microtus arvalis*) from a range of Neolithic sites (Martínková *et al.* 2013).

This article is based on a review of 613 radiocarbon measurements and 79 luminescence ages from 31 sites (Table 1; Fig. 1). This analysis builds on the review of Griffiths (2016), who provides a synthesis of the chronology of activity in the fourth millennium cal BC. Our original intention was to confine ourselves to Late Neolithic activity associated with Grooved Ware, but it soon became apparent that round-based pottery (as found at Isbister chambered tomb) and Grooved Ware (as found at Barnhouse) were almost certainly in contemporary use during the 31st century cal BC at the very least (Fig. S1; Richards *et al.* 2016a: figs. 6–8). We therefore consider all dating evidence associated with Grooved Ware sites and with sites of the later fourth millennium, although our analysis centres on the centuries between *c.* 3300 and 2300 cal BC.

All the chronological modelling discussed in this review has been undertaken using the program OxCal v4.2 (Bronk Ramsey 2009) and the atmospheric calibration curve for the northern hemisphere published by Reimer *et al.* (2013). The chronological models for each site are described in Supplementary Information, and are defined exactly by the brackets and OxCal CQL2 keywords on the left-hand side of the technical graphs (<http://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/>). The posterior density estimates output by the model are shown in black, with the unconstrained calibrated radiocarbon dates shown in outline. The other distributions correspond to aspects of the model. For example, *start_isbister_primary* is the estimated date when burial in the chambered tomb at Isbister began (supplementary Fig. S1). In the text and tables, the Highest Posterior

Density intervals of the posterior density estimates produced by the models are given *in italics*, followed by a reference to the relevant parameter name and the figures in which the model which produced it is defined. Key parameters for the chronology of Late Neolithic Orkney are listed in supplementary Tables S4 and S5.

The Late Neolithic timescape of Orkney

Formal modelling not only enables more precise chronologies for individual sites, but allows us to characterise the timing and duration of different kinds of phenomena, and then to combine these into a much more differentiated narrative than available up till now. First, we set out some of what we think are key elements in the narrative for the Late Neolithic (referring the reader again to the Supplementary Information for site detail).

Chambered cairns

Figure 2 shows models for the use of stalled cairns and Maeshowe passage graves on Orkney. Sites which have more than two radiocarbon dates are represented by the estimated dates for the start and end of activity taken from the site-based model. We have taken the radiocarbon dates on human remains from within the primary deposits in the chambers to indicate the period when the tombs were used for burial. Although it is possible that these represent secondary burials, the number of dated individuals across the period of burial at, for example, Quanterness (Fig. S6) suggests that this is unlikely. The single date from the Knowe of Laird (SUERC-45833) is not included in either model as this tomb underwent a series of modifications and it not clear from which phase of activity the dated sample derives. We have taken the dated human remains at the Point of Cott to relate to the use of the stalled cairn (Fig. S16).

It is clear that both stalled cairns and Maeshowe passage graves (Fig. 7g-h) were first constructed in the middle centuries of the fourth millennium cal BC, although on the basis of current evidence it is not possible to say which came first. Human remains may have been deposited in Maeshowe passage graves into the middle centuries of the third millennium, whereas the primary deposition of human remains in stalled cairns appears to have ended in the first quarter of the millennium. Although a number of tombs from which we have radiocarbon dates became horned cairns in later phases, only two dates associated with this type of monument are available (Table 2). These suggest that the example at Vestra Fiold, at least, was constructed in the second quarter of the third millennium cal BC (Fig. 2).

After, but sometimes overlapping with, the deposition of human remains in particular chambered cairns, animal remains were deposited in them. A model for the currency of this activity is also shown in Fig. 2. Animal remains were clearly deposited in some tombs whilst human remains were deposited in others.

The Orkney vole

The common vole (*Microtus arvalis*) is of significance for the discussion of Neolithic Orkney because today it is found on Orkney and on the European continent, but not on mainland Britain. Since the species cannot have survived the Last Glacial Maximum on the archipelago, the most likely explanation for its introduction is through direct long-distance sea travel between Orkney and the continent.

Recent studies of dental morphology and mitochondrial DNA have been undertaken in an attempt to identify the likely origins of the Orkney vole population (Martínková *et al.* 2013; but see Sheridan and Pétrequin 2014 for a critique of their interpretation). This work has been accompanied by a programme of direct AMS radiocarbon dating of vole remains from Neolithic sites on Orkney. Two existing measurements from the Links of Noltland (OxA-1081–1; Table S3) were undertaken in the early years of AMS dating and fall outside the span of the measurements undertaken more recently (Fig. 3). Given the significant refinements in bone pretreatment protocols for radiocarbon dating that have occurred in the intervening period (e.g. Brown *et al.* 1988), we have chosen to exclude these measurements from the model shown in Fig. 3.

This model suggests that the common vole first appeared on Orkney in 3455–3100 cal BC (95% probability; start Orkney voles; Fig. 3), probably in 3315–3135 cal BC (68% probability).

Late Neolithic settlement

Figure 4 is a schematic diagram summarising the estimated dates when different activities occurred in later fourth and third millennium Orkney. The horizontal bars represent the probability that a particular site or monument-type was in use in a particular 25-year period (light shading is less probable, darker shading more probable).

For the settlements and stone circles, distributions have been taken from the site-based models defined or referenced in the supplementary information. Distributions for the chambered cairns

derive from the model shown in Fig. 2, and those for the appearance of the Orkney vole from the model defined in Fig. 3.

House architecture

Figure 5 summarises the model for the currency of timber and stone houses on Orkney (Figs S19–S24). The first houses to be used were timber (*57.3% probable*), in use from *3560–3360 cal BC (95% probability; start_timber_houses; Fig. 5)*, probably *3445–3370 cal BC (68% probability)*. The first stone houses were linear in form (*63.1% probable*), being in use from *3490–3300 cal BC (95% probability; start_linear; Fig. 5)*, probably *3410–3330 cal BC (68% probability)*. Timber and stone houses were therefore both in use concurrently during the second half of the fourth millennium cal BC.

Settlement intensity

Figure 6 provides an estimate of the intensity of settlement activity in ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ areas across Orkney from 3500–2200 cal BC, derived from estimates of the number of structures in use on individual sites in 25-year periods (see Richards *et al.* 2016a: fig. 14). The intensity in activity in the core, defined as the concentration of sites and monuments in the Stenness-Brodgar area, from *c.* 3125–2850 cal BC (Fig. 6) occurs in tandem with the start of a general decline in the periphery, defined simply as the rest of the archipelago, with a clear lull in settlement intensity apparent in the 28th century cal BC. Although settlement in the periphery appears to recover to its early intensity, the core shows no similar recovery, before peripheral settlement intensity goes into a second major decline in the later part of the millennium.

Discussion

The emergent chronology set out above and in Supplementary Information appears to demonstrate a more complex picture than previously available of extensive and overlapping activities, concurrences and discontinuities occurring at different sites throughout Orkney during the fourth and third millennia cal BC. This encourages us to begin radically to reconfigure this period.

First, there is now broader evidence to support the contemporaneity of early stalled chambered cairns and timber houses (Richards & A.M. Jones 2016). The linear, orthostat-divided stone houses previously considered to characterise the Early Neolithic (e.g. Knap of Howar), are now revealed to be a later development *c.* 3300 cal BC (Figs. 5 & 7a-b). Round-based pottery was in use within

the early timber settlements and from this point onwards a very complex picture is unveiled of round-based bowls and Grooved Ware vessels overlapping in use between various forms of house architecture at different sites across the archipelago, particularly during the 32nd–30th centuries cal BC (Fig. 7a-f). Stalled cairns and Maeshowe passage graves (Fig. 7g-h) seem to have been employed initially as places for human burial, and later as places where animal remains were deposited. This later phase of activity may coincide with the addition of horn-works to some stalled cairns to create large long mounds, or in the case of Vestra Fiold an entirely new mound (Richards 2013: 152–176). On the basis of the dating of human bone from Quanterness, it can be argued that passage grave architecture begins in Orkney in the decades around 3400 cal BC. On current evidence, this would make Orcadian passage graves the earliest examples of this architecture in Britain and Ireland, accepting that Carrowmore is of an entirely different architectural form (*contra* Hensey 2015).

Secondly, we are now able to trace in some detail the development of fourth millennium cal BC settlement and identify the tendency towards nucleation. This trend continues into the third millennium cal BC, culminating at sites such as Skara Brae which has substantial conjoined stone-houses, with encircling casing walls containing thick ‘midden’. Between 3200 and 3000 cal BC two main occurrences transform the appearance of the settlements into large mounds; superimposed or recurrent nucleated houses, and the deposition of substantial midden material.¹

This phenomenon occurs throughout Orkney at sites as far apart as Stonehall, Mainland (Richards *et al.* 2016b), and Pool, Sanday (Hunter 2007). With more detailed chronological analysis, settlement histories provide a more punctuated narrative of dwelling. The complex sequence at Pool (MacSween *et al.* 2015) reveals discrete superimposed phases of occupation respectively associated with early and late forms of house architecture and Grooved Ware. At the nearby settlement at the Bay of Stove, Sanday, a similar (but undated) division is observable. Here a nucleated Neolithic settlement is eroding from a small cliff and a massive Neolithic settlement mound lies *c.* 200m metres inland. Incised Grooved Ware has been recovered from the eroding settlement, while test pits into the large mound produced plastic ornamented Grooved Ware (Bond *et al.* 1995). At these two Sanday sites, a disjunction is evident in settlement between *c.* 2800 and 2600 cal BC. More or less the same occurs at Skara Brae where an earlier nucleated settlement with recessed house architecture founded in the centuries around 2900 cal BC is possibly abandoned after a relatively short period of inhabitation and re-occupied in the 28th century cal BC (Fig. 4).

In the Stenness-Brodgar area of western Mainland, a similar situation is now apparent with incised Grooved Ware and recessed house architecture appearing with the founding of the nucleated Barnhouse settlement in the late 32nd century cal BC. However, from the outset monumental architecture (House 2) is a dominant component of Barnhouse, a feature that becomes exaggerated with the subsequent construction of the massive Structure 8 (Fig. 7f). Although the earliest settlement remains to be uncovered, the Ness of Brodgar seems to share a similar trajectory to Barnhouse with monumental structures in the first centuries of the third millennium cal BC (e.g. Fig. 7e).

So across Orkney, including the Stenness-Brodgar area of western Mainland, between the late 32nd–29th centuries cal BC, settlement nucleation accelerates alongside the deposition of substantial midden deposits to create identifiable ‘villages’. At the majority of these villages a disjuncture occurs *c.* 2800 cal BC involving abandonment and a spatial shift in settlement. Then, in the 27th–26th centuries cal BC, a process of reoccupation emerges that continues until a final abandonment of villages in the 24th century cal BC. This phase of occupation involves different house architecture, larger houses and differently made and decorated Grooved Ware. However, this temporal and spatial sequence is not universal, and at the Bay of Stove, Sanday, the original village is never reoccupied and a massive settlement mound accrues a few hundred metres away. Equally, at Tofts Ness, Sanday occupation appears to continue to the end of the third millennium cal BC.

The later part of this narrative does not include settlements in the Stenness-Brodgar area because here something very different happened. The founding of Barnhouse and Ness of Brodgar coincide with the developments occurring in other parts of Mainland and the outer isles. Monumental construction in and around them significantly drew on the architecture of ‘big houses’ (Fig. 7e-f) and may have materialised links and relations beyond Orkney (see Richards 2013: 74–8). However, unlike many of the other villages these sites are never reoccupied. Instead, from the 28th century cal BC, the Stenness-Brodgar area appears to have no longer served as a significant place of human dwelling. The later history of Ness of Brodgar involved extensive ‘middening’, and then an episode of large-scale feasting around the remains of the monumental Structure 10 (Card *et al.* in press), while the construction of the Ring of Brodgar may have occurred towards the mid-third millennium (Supplementary Information; Figs S7–8).

Provisional conclusions

Instead of uninterrupted continuity, a much more complex and differentiated sequence comes into sight. At the island scale, this appears to be a history of interaction between households and relatively small communities. Because of the constant and rapid changes, it is plausible that this was a competitive situation, with rivalries played out in monument construction, forms of material culture and the social space of houses. There is good reason to see the innovations of both passage graves and Grooved Ware as part of local social strategies of differentiation (cf. Sheridan 2004). The foundation of new settlements in areas previously little occupied, such as Barnhouse (Richards *et al.* 2016a), and the constant development of the form and interior space of houses (Figs. 5 & 7a-d), can be thought of on the same lines. Perhaps the local political tensions and social concerns driving the trajectory towards closer settlement nucleation could not be sustained, despite people resorting to investing time and labour in monuments relating to deities, ancestors and origins that stretched well beyond the shores of Late Neolithic Orkney.

The Orkney story is also one of connections throughout, as suggested above for passage graves and stone circles. Whether a consequence of local identities constituted through far reaching contacts or relationships forged within imagined communities, the late Neolithic world was clearly expansive in nature (Thomas 2010; Richards *et al.* 2016a; Sheridan *et al.* in prep). If there is a case for seeing Grooved Ware as originating in Orkney, does the coincidence of the appearance of the Orkney vole allow us to think of inspiration, through direct human contact, from regions (from northern France to the Alpine foreland) where flat-based pottery was already common in the later fourth millennium? And with the decline of Late Neolithic settlement in Orkney, it is perhaps no coincidence that previous connections and networks lapsed too, seen in the sparse Beaker presence in the archipelago. History had moved elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

We thank: all the many colleagues whose cooperation has made the dating reported here possible; Mark Edmonds, Ann MacSween, Lekky Shepherd and Alison Sheridan for constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this paper; and Kirsty Harding for help with the figures. *The Times of Their Lives* (www.totl.eu) is funded by the European Research Council (Advanced Investigator Grant: 295412), and led by Alasdair Whittle and Alex Bayliss.

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Figure 1. Map showing the location of sites considered in this review.

Figure 2. Probability distributions of dates from chambered cairns on Orkney. Each distribution represents the relative probability that an event occurs at a particular time. For each of the dates two distributions have been plotted: one in outline, which is the result of simple radiocarbon calibration, and a solid one, based on the chronological model used. Distributions other than those relating to particular samples have been taken from models defined in supplementary Figs S1 (Isbister), S3 (Cuween), S6 (Quanterness), S13 (Knowe of Rowiegar), S16 (Point of Cott) and S18 (Holm of Papa Westray North), and MacSween *et al.* 2015, fig. 13 (Quoyness). Other distributions are based on the chronological model defined here, and shown in black. For example, the distribution ‘start stalled cairns’ is the estimated date when human burial began in these cairns. The large square brackets down the left-hand side of the figure along with the OxCal keywords define the model exactly.

Figure 3. Probability distributions of dates from specimens of Orkney vole from Neolithic sites. The format is identical to that of Fig. S1. Measurements followed by a question mark and shown in outline have been excluded from the model for reasons explained in the text, and are simple calibrated dates (Stuiver & Reimer 1993). The large square brackets down the left-hand side of the figure along with the OxCal keywords define the model exactly.

Figure 4. Schematic diagram showing the periods of use of dated Neolithic settlements in Orkney of the later fourth and third millennia cal BC (mauve: associated with round-based pottery; green: associated with flat-based pottery; Green is left black as the ceramic association of this unpublished site is uncertain). The periods of human burial in stalled cairns and passage graves are also shown, along with the period when animal remains were deposited within them. The dates of construction for the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar, and the date of the appearance of Orkney vole are also shown.

Figure 5. Probability distributions for beginnings and endings of use of Neolithic timber and stone houses on Orkney. The format is identical to that of Fig. S1, although the tails on some distributions have been shortened. The distributions are derived from the model shown in Figs S19–S24.

Figure 6. Number of dated Neolithic houses in use in Orkney during the later fourth and third millennia cal BC. The ‘core’ area contains the settlements at Barnhouse and the Ness of Brodgar, the ‘periphery’ all other settlements.

Figure 7. Architectural range of Neolithic stone house structures: (a) Knap of Howar; (b) Stonehall Knoll House 3; (c) Barnhouse House 6; (d) Skara Brae Hut 1; (e) Ness of Brodgar Structure 8; (f) Barnhouse Structure 8, and chambered cairns: (g) Knowe of Yarso stalled cairn; (h) Wideford Hill passage grave.