

## Decorating the Houses of the Dead: Incised and Pecked Motifs in Orkney Chambered Tombs<sup>1</sup>

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*Megalithic art has often been treated as a unitary phenomenon, related to the spread of farming across Western Europe. This approach does not do justice to the very different ways in which tomb decoration was employed by particular communities. This article focuses on the megalithic art of Orkney, much of it recorded for the first time during a recent field survey. This is normally interpreted as a local variant of the style of 'art' found in Neolithic Ireland, but on close examination it has much stronger links with the abstract motifs found in local settlements. Whereas the megalithic art of Ireland may have celebrated the passage of the dead to another world, in Orkney it was used to emphasize their continued involvement in the affairs of the living.*

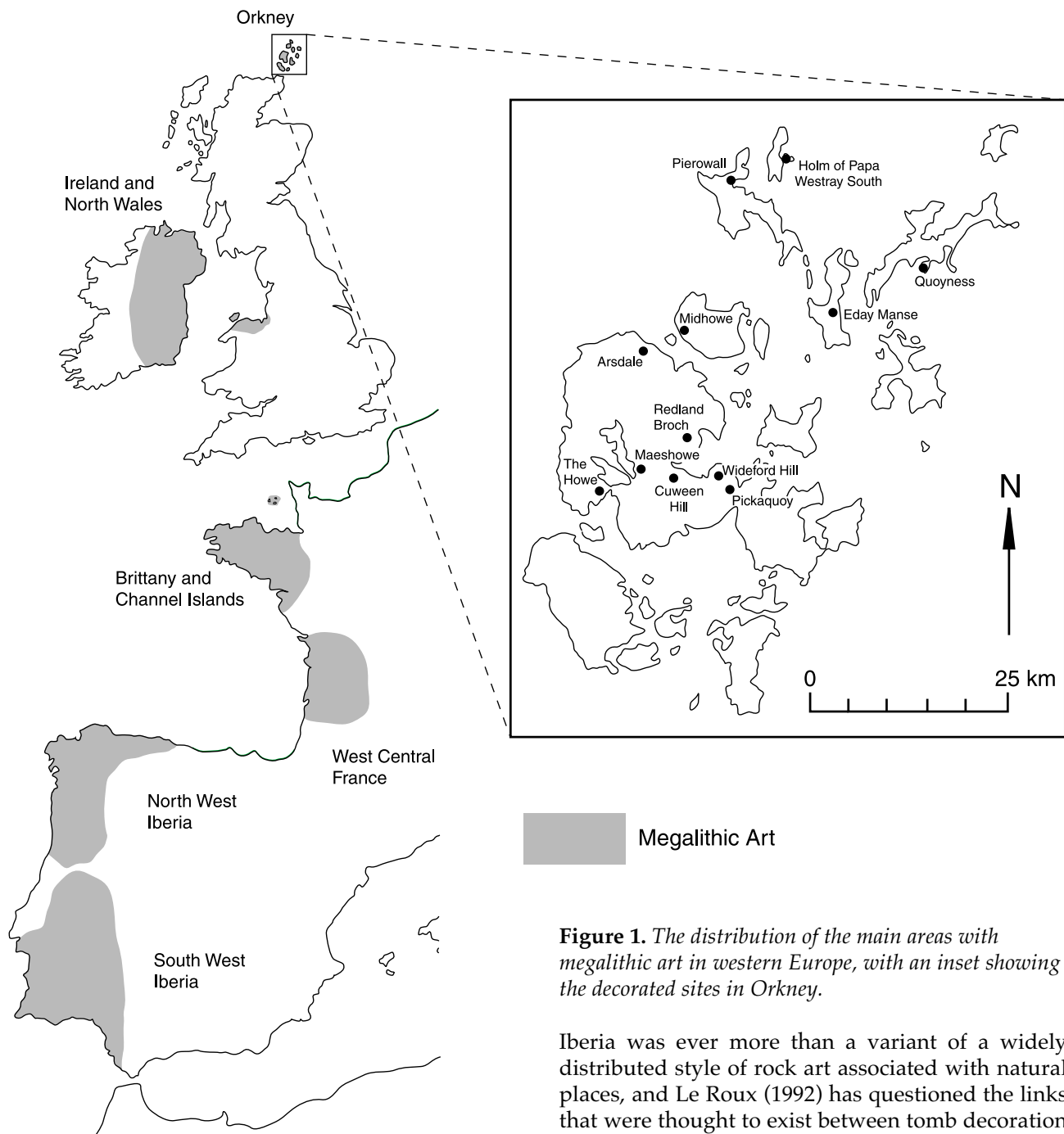
Archaeologists can become the prisoners of the very language that they use. That is why there have been so many different attempts to characterize the 'Neolithic' period and to define the significance of 'megalithic' tombs. The word 'art' poses even greater problems, for its application is not confined to one region or period of antiquity. It is a modern, Western concept that carries quite different connotations when it is applied to the material culture of the past. Here it refers to the use of visual imagery to convey a wide range of information, and aesthetic considerations play a less important role. Given the sheer variety of ancient 'art', it is doubtful whether it is a coherent concept at all. It may be more helpful to study how visual images were used in specific situations in prehistory.

The problem is particularly acute in the archaeology of Western Europe, for not only has the same terminology extended to a wide range of different phenomena, but much of the pioneering work was carried out by the same person. Henri Breuil was a pioneer in the study of Palaeolithic cave paintings, but he was also one of the first students of what became known as 'megalithic art'. In each case his work was concerned with questions of style and chronology and his interpretation followed one dominant hypothesis. Palaeolithic art, he suggested, could

be interpreted in terms of hunting magic (Breuil 1954), whilst megalithic art originated in the portrayal of the human form (Breuil 1934).

Although Breuil played a prominent part in the definition of both these styles, later studies of the same material have diverged to a significant extent. Breuil's chronology for cave paintings has been rejected and current research considers a whole range of abstract signs that he did not accept as 'art' at all (Clottes 1998). Today more local studies play an important role. Greater attention is paid to the organization of the individual motifs within particular sites. Scholars have tried to interpret the decorated surfaces inside these caves in relation to their detailed topography and have investigated the other evidence of human activity that is found there (Clottes 1996).

The subject of this article has been treated in a very different way. Accounts of megalithic art have followed a more traditional agenda. Breuil's specific interpretation soon went out of fashion, and tomb decoration was studied as part of a wider programme of research concerned with the diffusion of a 'Neolithic' way of life (Fig. 1). This investigated the adoption of farming in Europe and the development of chambered tombs. There was still an emphasis on questions of style and chronology, but individual motifs were analyzed in the same way as portable



**Figure 1.** *The distribution of the main areas with megalithic art in western Europe, with an inset showing the decorated sites in Orkney.*

artefacts. The main objective of this work was to document cultural connections in the past; and that was only possible because megalithic art was thought of as a unified phenomenon (Daniel 1958; Shee Twohig 1981; Burenhult 1999).

Recent studies have challenged the usefulness of this approach. Bueno & Balbín (1998) have expressed doubts as to whether the megalithic art of

Iberia was ever more than a variant of a widely distributed style of rock art associated with natural places, and Le Roux (1992) has questioned the links that were thought to exist between tomb decoration in Brittany and that in Ireland (for another view see O'Sullivan 1996). It has also been suggested that some of the motifs found in different parts of Atlantic Europe look so similar to one another because they refer to the visions experienced by people in altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1993). If that were the case, these images may share a common source in the human nervous system. Beyond the obvious point that they were created inside stone-built tombs, they need have no

bearing on communications between different groups along the Atlantic seaboard.

There have been other changes in the ways in which this evidence has been treated, but at present these are essentially local developments. In France and Spain it is clear that decorated menhirs were sometimes incorporated in the fabric of later tombs (L'Helgouac'h 1996; Bueno & Balbín 1990). There are also links with the designs found on portable artefacts in these countries. A number of studies concern the sequence in which the images were made and the organization of these motifs inside particular monuments. These new approaches are exemplified by recent papers on the megaliths of western Iberia, but they have yet to supersede more traditional approaches to this material (Bueno & Balbín 1998; Jorge 1998). It seems as if the integrity of megalithic art is being called into question before appropriate methods have been developed for studying tomb decoration in a local context. Analysis of this evidence still lags behind research on Palaeolithic art.

### Orkney and Ireland

It is in the areas where Breuil's influence was weaker that some of the most promising research has taken place. This is particularly true in Ireland, where work has investigated the sequence and organization of the different components of megalithic art. O'Sullivan (1989; 1996) has identified successive styles of carving in the Boyne Valley and Eogan has argued that particular kinds of motif may be associated with different parts of the monuments (1986, chs. 7 & 8). Dronfield (1996) takes a similar approach when he comments on the striking link between circular imagery and the positions of passages inside chambered tombs. Shee Twohig (1996) has shown how special attention was paid to the right-hand side of the burial chamber and other authors have considered the relationship between the more public displays of carved motifs on the kerbs of some of the later tombs and the more private art that is found inside them (Eogan 1986, chs. 7 & 8; Bradley 1999).

These are important initiatives and it is unfortunate that at present they cannot be taken much further. That is because Irish megalithic art has almost no equivalents in other media. There is a certain overlap with the imagery associated with natural surfaces in the landscape (Johnston 1993), but the chronological relationship between these two groups of designs is by no means clear. It seems as if the megalithic art of Ireland has few links with other kinds of material culture.

A similar problem arises in Orkney, 450 km from the northern coast of Ulster. Like Ireland, it contains numerous megalithic tombs, but in this case very few of them are decorated with pecked motifs (Fig. 1; Shee Twohig 1981, 227–8; Davidson & Henshall 1989, 81–3). Instead, some of the designs associated with the Irish sites are found in other contexts in Orkney. They were used to embellish the walls of a series of houses and they also occur on pottery and a variety of stone artefacts (Ritchie 1995, ch. 4; Shee Twohig 1997). That is why the motifs in the well-preserved buildings at Skara Brae feature in Shee Twohig's account of 'megalithic' art (1981, 238–9, 286–90).

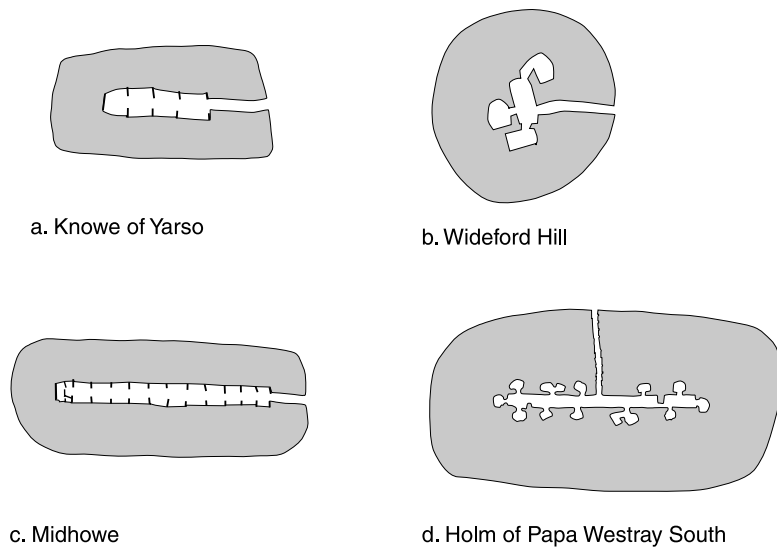
It seems ironic that the largest concentration of decorated stones in Western Europe should be in Ireland where they are confined to tombs, whilst the very small group of carved stones in Orkney forms only part of a richer material culture in which the same motifs extend into other media. In each case there are difficulties in studying megalithic art in its wider cultural context. Fortunately, another possibility now arises. Recent fieldwork in Orkney has identified a different style of 'art' in the local passage graves. Most of this evidence had been unrecognized before. At last it may be possible to study tomb decoration on a local scale.

This article asks two questions: What was the significance of the images found in megalithic monuments, and how were they related to other kinds of material culture? This account presents a detailed study of the newly-discovered evidence from Orkney and compares it with what is known about Irish megalithic art.

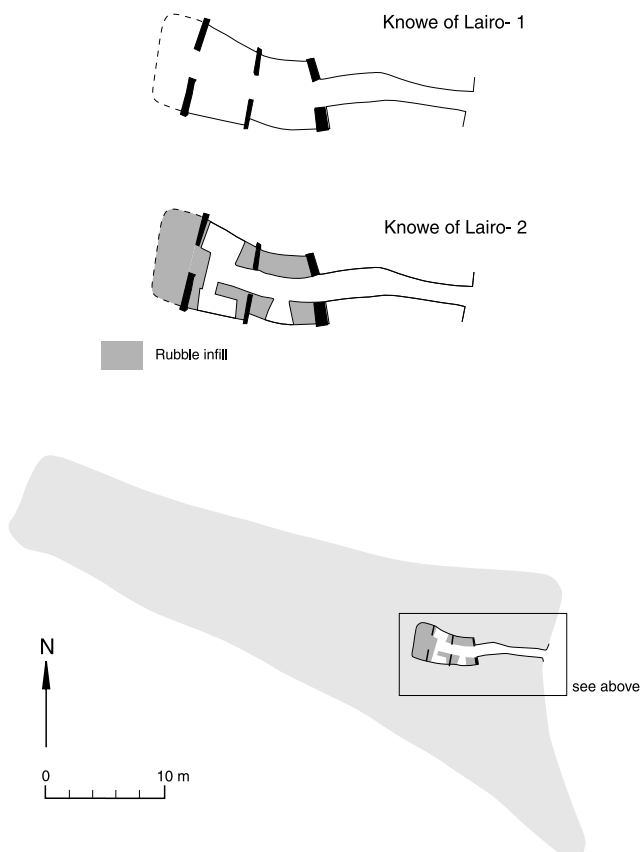
### The Neolithic sequence in Orkney

While the radiocarbon chronology is by no means clear, it seems likely that the Neolithic sequence in Orkney can be divided into two general phases, although their characteristic artefacts and architecture overlapped. Each is characterized by a style of decorated pottery. The earlier group is known as Unstan Ware, and the later style is Grooved Ware. The all-important transition took place a little before 3000 BC (Renfrew 1979, 199–212; Davidson & Henshall 1989, ch. 8; Hunter & MacSween 1991). There is sufficient evidence to distinguish between an earlier style of Grooved Ware, characterized by incised designs, and a later phase when the decorative scheme is simpler and involves the use of cordons (MacSween 1992; Cowie & MacSween 1999; Sheridan 1999).

To some extent the same divisions are found among the stone-built monuments of Orkney, al-



**Figure 2.** Outline plans of four chambered tombs in Orkney. At Knowe of Yarso and Midhowe the chamber is subdivided along a single axis, whilst the side cells at Wideford Hill and Holm of Papa Westray South are approached through separate entrance passages.



**Figure 3.** The sequence at Knowe of Lairi: in its first phase a tripartite tomb, later reconstructed as a Maeshowe-type monument.

though a number of individual sites do not conform to this scheme, either because they combine elements from more than one structural tradition or because the radiocarbon dates associated with different styles of building overlap. The simplest distinction is between one series of chambered cairns in which an elongated chamber is subdivided by upright slabs and another group of monuments with a main chamber and a series of side chambers or cells, each of them approached by a separate entrance passage (Fig. 2; Davidson & Henshall 1989, chs. 4 & 5). In the first group the simpler monuments often divide into three sections (tripartite cairns), whilst the more complex structures (stalled cairns) are longer and may be broken into as many as fourteen subdivisions. The monuments with side cells occupy considerable mounds or cairns and are typified by Quanterness and Quoyness. Maeshowe, the greatest tomb in Orkney, is a more accomplished variant of that type, but it has given its name to this style of architecture.

The chambers which were subdivided internally seem to have been associated with Unstan Ware, but those with distinct side cells present more of a problem as they can be accompanied by finds of Unstan Ware, Grooved Ware or both ceramic styles. Few of the individual tombs are closely dated, usually because they were excavated a long time ago, but internally consistent radiocarbon determinations from three major sites — Isbister (Hedges 1983, 61–71), Point of Cott (Barber 1997, 58–60) and Quanterness (Renfrew 1979, 68–9) — appear to support the conventional sequence. So does the evidence from Knowe of Lairi (Fig. 3), where a massive chambered tomb was rebuilt soon after its construction, so that what began as a long chamber subdivided by upright slabs (a tripartite tomb) was converted into a narrower space in which a series of side cells were set into the chamber wall (Grant & Wilson 1943). The later monument has more in common with Quoyness and Quanterness.

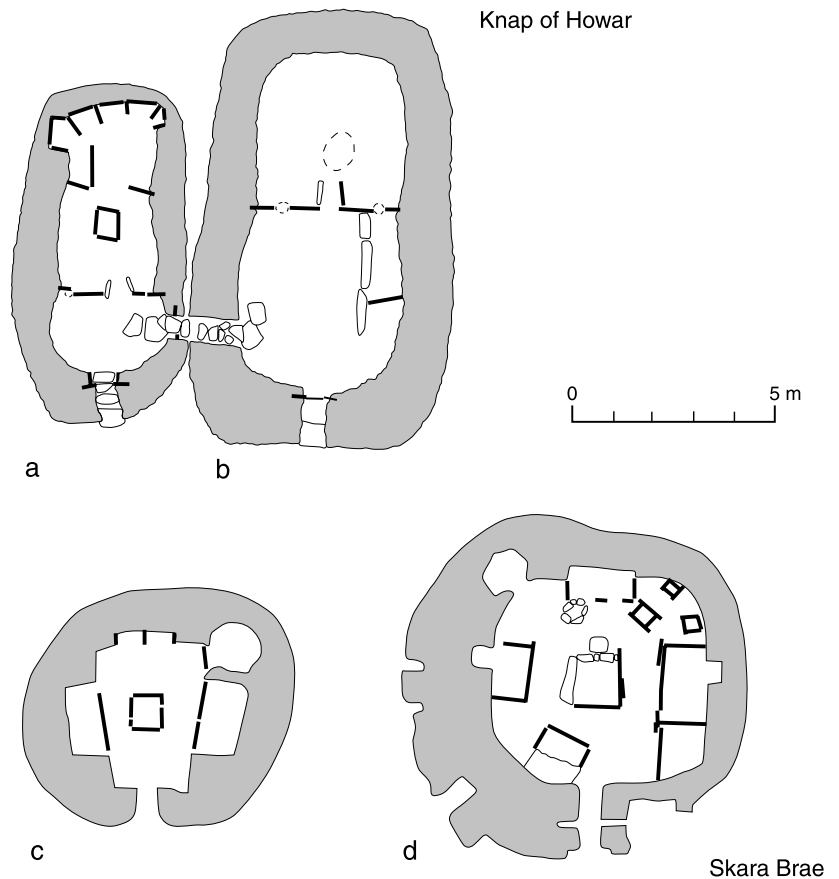
Each major tradition of tombs has its counterpart in the domestic sphere (Fig. 4). The chambers that were subdivided by upright slabs recall the organization of space in a series of early houses, characterized by Knap of Howar (Richards 1993) and a site recently excavated by one of the writers at Stonehall. These are associated with Unstan Ware. The later tombs have much more in common with the houses associated with Grooved Ware in settlements such as Rinyo, Barnhouse, Links of Noltland and Skara Brae. Here the house may be entered by a low passage and the main internal space can be supplemented by recesses or small side cells set into the thickness of the external wall (Richards 1993). On certain sites there is a greater emphasis on the area to the right of the entrance, just as there is inside some of the chambered tombs (Richards 1991).

It is easy to make too much of the contrast between the different kinds of tomb. With the notable exception of Maeshowe, each has rather similar proportions. The chambers are generally rectangular and achieve a maximum length of 26 m in the case of the stalled cairns and 20 m at the Maeshowe tomb of

Holm of Papa Westray South. In the smaller tripartite tombs the chamber is usually about 4 m long, and, with the exception of Holm of Papa Westray South, the figure is not very different for the Maeshowe cairns. There are further similarities in the overall planning of these structures. Like the tripartite cairns, the stalled cairns are generally entered at one end. The chamber, which is spanned by a barrel vault, is divided into segments by the slabs that project from the walls. These resemble successive doorways and divide the internal space into a series of rooms (Richards 1992a). The commonest number is three or four, but the most substantial of the stalled cairns include as many as fourteen of these compartments. The Maeshowe tombs contain a similar number of side cells. There are generally between three and six of these, but again the greatest number is fourteen.

These figures do not tell the whole story, for

there is a difference between the ways in which these monuments could be used (Boast & Evans 1986, 199–203; Richards 1988). In the earlier chambered cairns, it would have been easy to move from one space to another along the central axis of the chamber. In the Maeshowe tombs, however, each side cell has its own entrance passage. These are often low and narrow so that it would take much greater effort to pass from one space to another. In two of these monuments, Cuween Hill and Holm of Papa Westray South, the difficulty is all the greater because there are further cells opening from the side chambers themselves. In effect, the traditional ground plan was transformed by the creation of more obvious thresholds within these tombs. These divisions have a counterpart in the recesses or cells set into the walls of Grooved Ware houses. It is interesting to note that such recesses were a particular feature of the earlier settlements in that tradition (Richards 1991).



**Figure 4.** Characteristic house plans from Neolithic Orkney. The linear houses epitomized by Knap of Howar (a and b) are succeeded by compact structures of the kind found at Skara Brae, where c) represents the earlier form of building and d) the kind of house associated with the later occupation of the site.

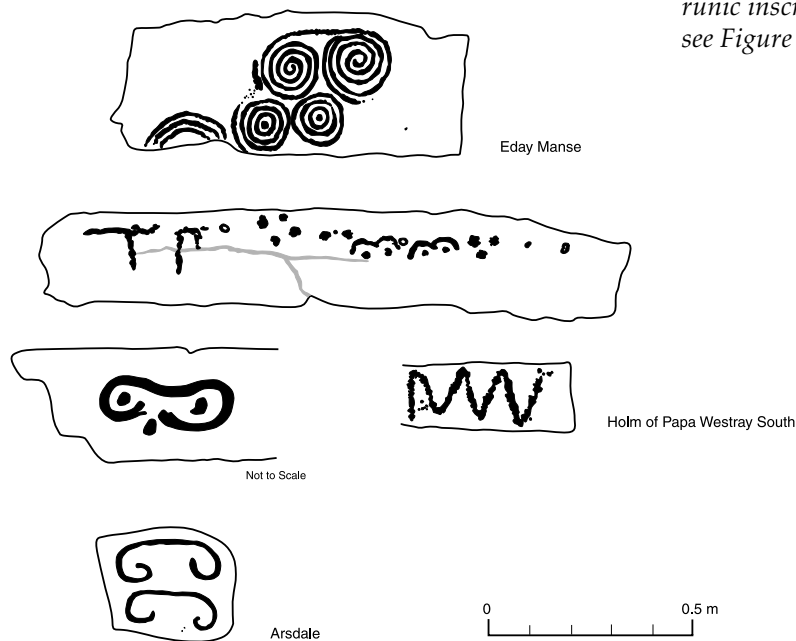


## Megalithic 'art' in Orkney

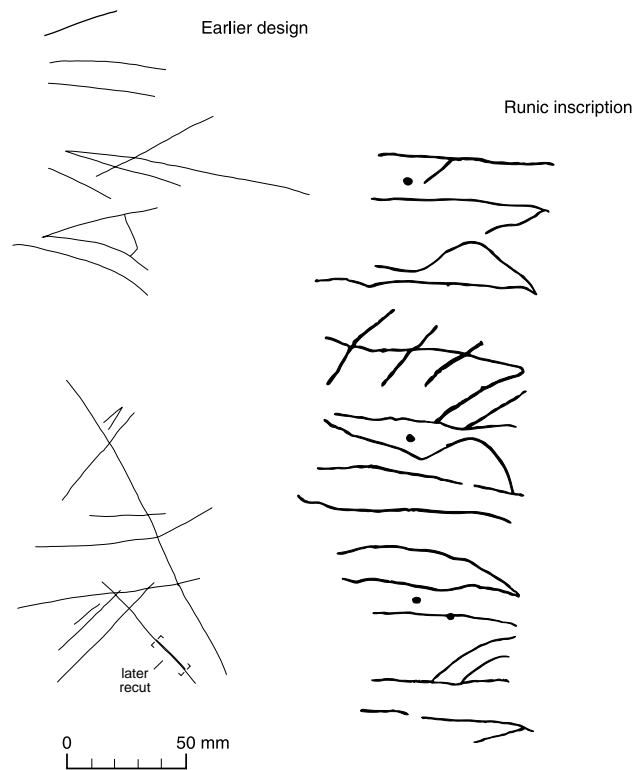
### Pecked motifs (Fig. 5)

As recently as 1986, the megalithic art of Orkney consisted of a small number of decorated stones from three chambered cairns of Maeshowe type: Holm of Papa Westray South, where some of the motifs remain *in situ*, and the destroyed monuments at Pierowall and Eday Manse. All were embellished with pecked motifs (Davidson & Henshall 1989, 81–3). The same applied to other decorated stones, now destroyed, at Holm of Papa Westray South and perhaps to more examples incorporated in the fabric of later monuments: a burnt mound at Pickaquoy (Shee Twohig 1981, 228) and the brochs at Redland and Midhowe (Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland 1946, 99, 200). Excavation at the Howe, Stromness, has identified a further stone with pecked decoration, this time from an early medieval context (Ballin-Smith 1994, 209–10). It probably originated in a chambered tomb on the site which has been compared with that at Maeshowe.

Pecked decoration occurs at sites on all the main types of bedrock in Orkney. The motifs found in the



**Figure 5.** Pecked designs at Eday Manse, Arsdale and Holm of Papa Westray South. One of the motifs at Holm of Papa Westray South, published by Petrie in 1863, no longer survives and its exact size is not known. Note the resemblance between the 'horned' spiral at Eday Manse and the 'eyebrow' motif at Holm of Papa Westray South.



**Figure 6.** Abstract design at Maeshowe (left) overlain by runic inscription (right). For the position of these motifs see Figure 11.

tombs have a limited repertoire, although quite elaborate panels occur at Pierowall and Eday Manse. There are cups and/or rings at Holm of Papa Westray South, Pierowall, Eday Manse, Pickaquoy and Midhowe; zigzag lines are found at Holm of Papa Westray South and the Howe; and a simple spiral is recorded at Redland broch. There are two more complex motifs: 'horned' or 'C-scroll' spirals (Shee Twohig 1997, 383), which have been found at Pierowall and Eday Manse; and the linked arcs, sometimes described as 'eyebrows', from Holm of Papa Westray South and a destroyed mound at Arsdale (Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland 1946, 85). A further example was identified at Holm of Papa Westray South in 1857 (Petrie 1863, 34) and it seems possible that this design was a less accomplished version of the 'horned' spiral found on other sites. There is no doubt that the surviving

decoration in this particular tomb was executed with much less skill than it was at Pierowall.

#### *Incised motifs* (Figs. 6–13)

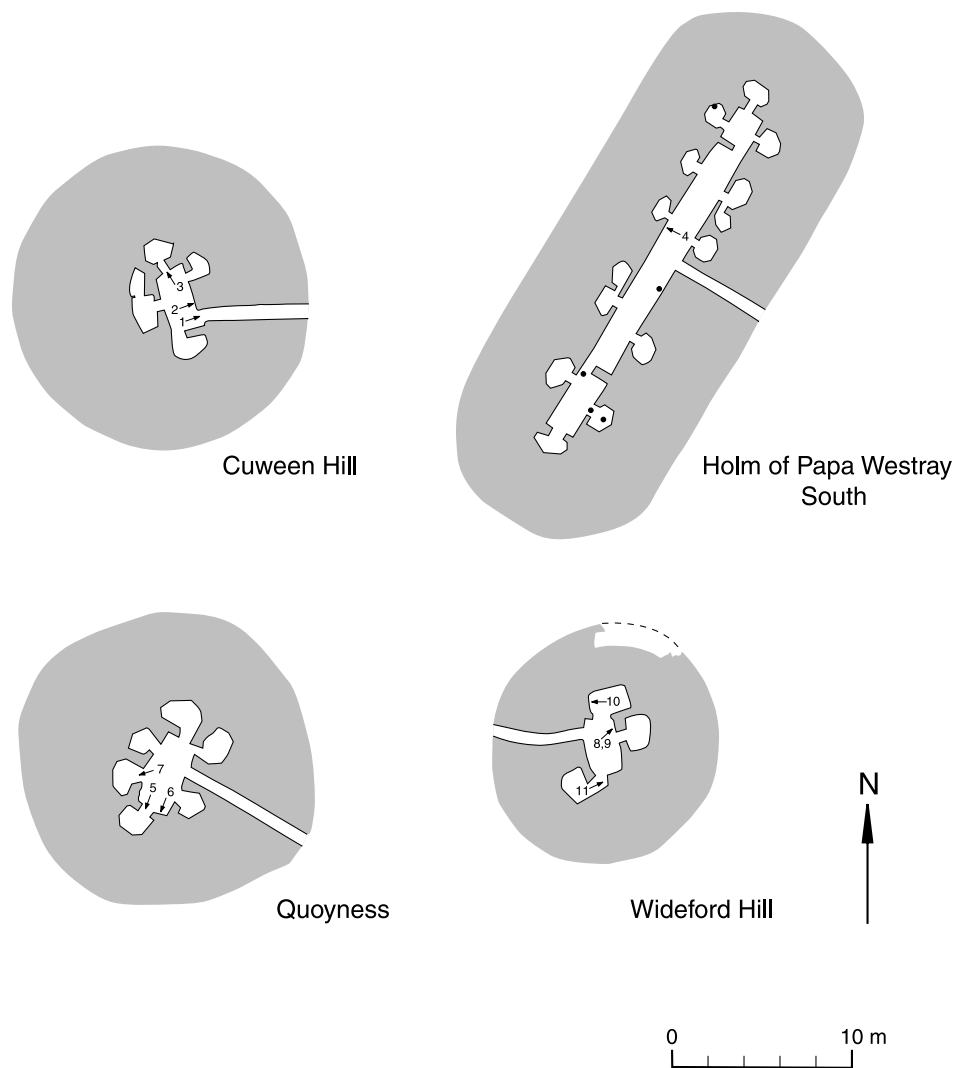
Whilst Davidson & Henshall's account of the Orkney tombs was still in press, they were able to add a note recording the identification of 'lightly incised scribings' in the main chamber of Maeshowe (1989, 146). This was the first indication of another decorative tradition associated with these monuments.

The first incised motif inside Maeshowe was recognized by Patrick Ashmore and published in 1986. It had originally been observed in the nineteenth century when it was mistaken for part of a runic inscription: one of many inside the tomb dating from the twelfth century AD (Fig. 11:12; Barnes 1994). Ashmore compared this motif with the incised decoration found in the settlement at Skara Brae and suggested that another design of similar character might underlie the Norse drawing of a walrus inside the main chamber at Maeshowe (Figs. 6 & 12:16). He also drew attention to 'miscellaneous scratchings' in other parts of the monument. Although his interpretation found general acceptance, there the matter rested.

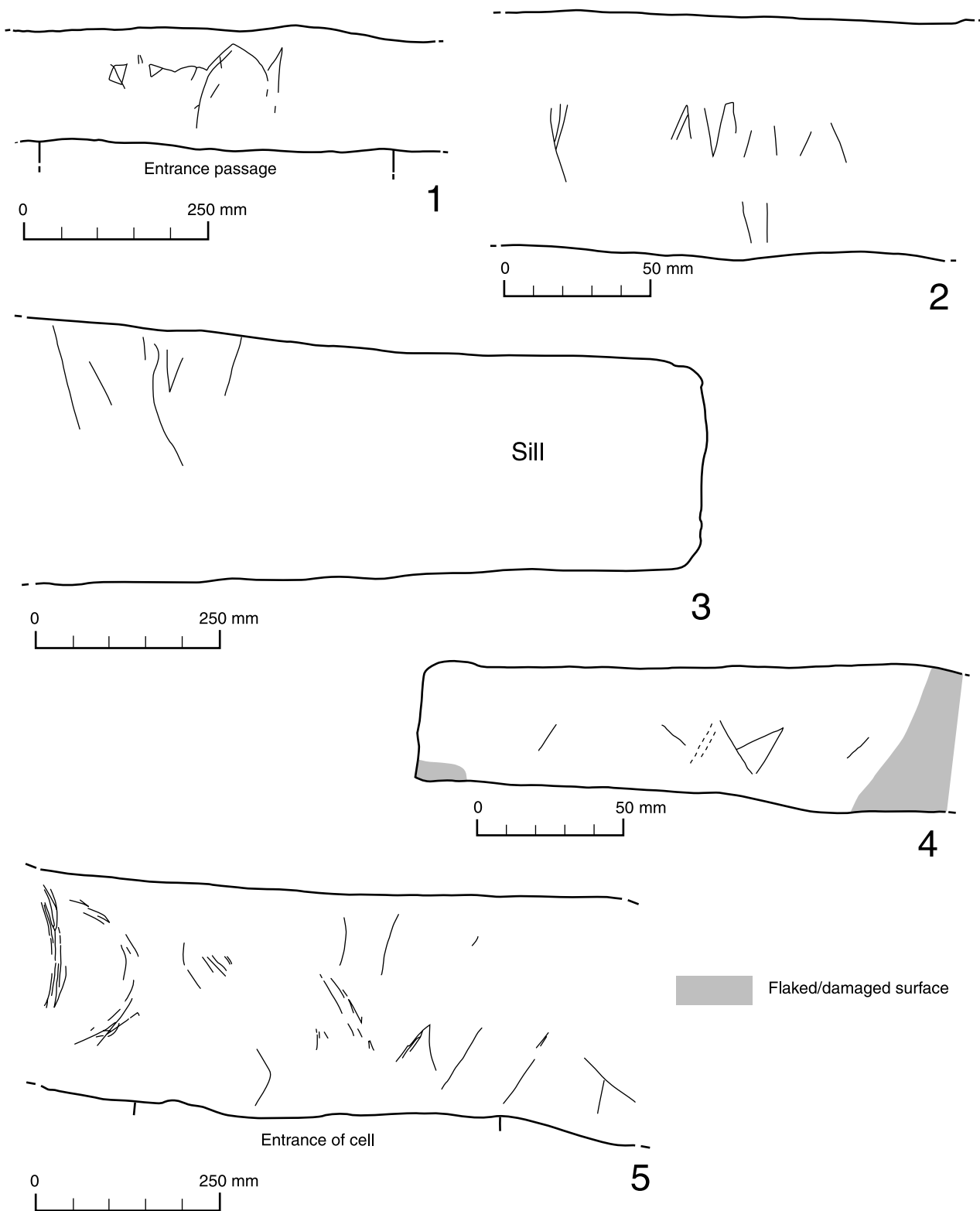
The next discoveries came about entirely by chance. On a visit to the chambered tomb at Quoyness one of the writers (Richard Bradley) observed incised motifs, very similar to those associated with Grooved Ware, on two stones in the main chamber (Figs. 8:5 & 9:6). Later that day he had the same experience in the passage grave on Cuween Hill (Fig. 8:1). These designs were duly recorded and published (Bradley 1998), and in the following year (1999) two of the writers (Richard Bradley and Tim Phillips) returned to Orkney to conduct a systematic search of all the well-preserved tombs, looking for similar evi-

dence (Bradley *et al.* 1999). This was completed in 1999. In the first season, an initial investigation of Maeshowe was conducted together with Colin Richards and Matilda Webb and a year later Matilda Webb drew the various motifs identified on that site. This account of the work supersedes what we have already written about incised motifs in Orkney and includes minor revisions to the drawings that appeared in those publications.

The designs are very difficult to see and can only be observed with the careful use of artificial lighting. Each tomb has been searched on at least two occasions and in some cases the second visit resulted in further finds. Despite the thoroughness with which the work was conducted, it is quite pos-



**Figure 7.** Locations of incised and pecked motifs in four Orkney chambered tombs. In the plan of Holm of Papa Westray South the black dots indicate the positions of the surviving pecked motifs already published from the site.



**Figure 8.** *Incised motifs at Cuween Hill (1–3), Holm of Papa Westray South (4) and Quoyness (5). For positions in the tombs see Figure 7.*



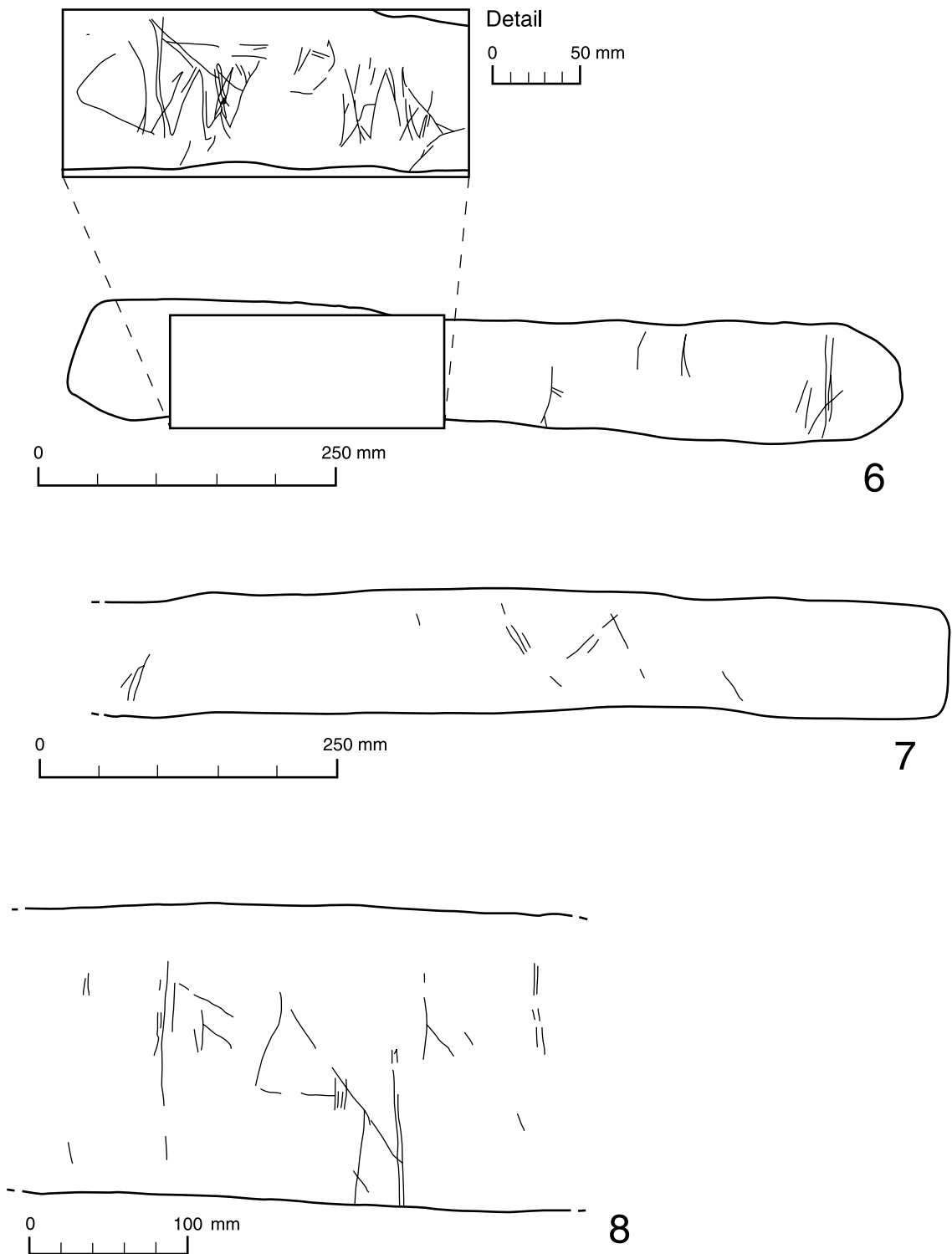
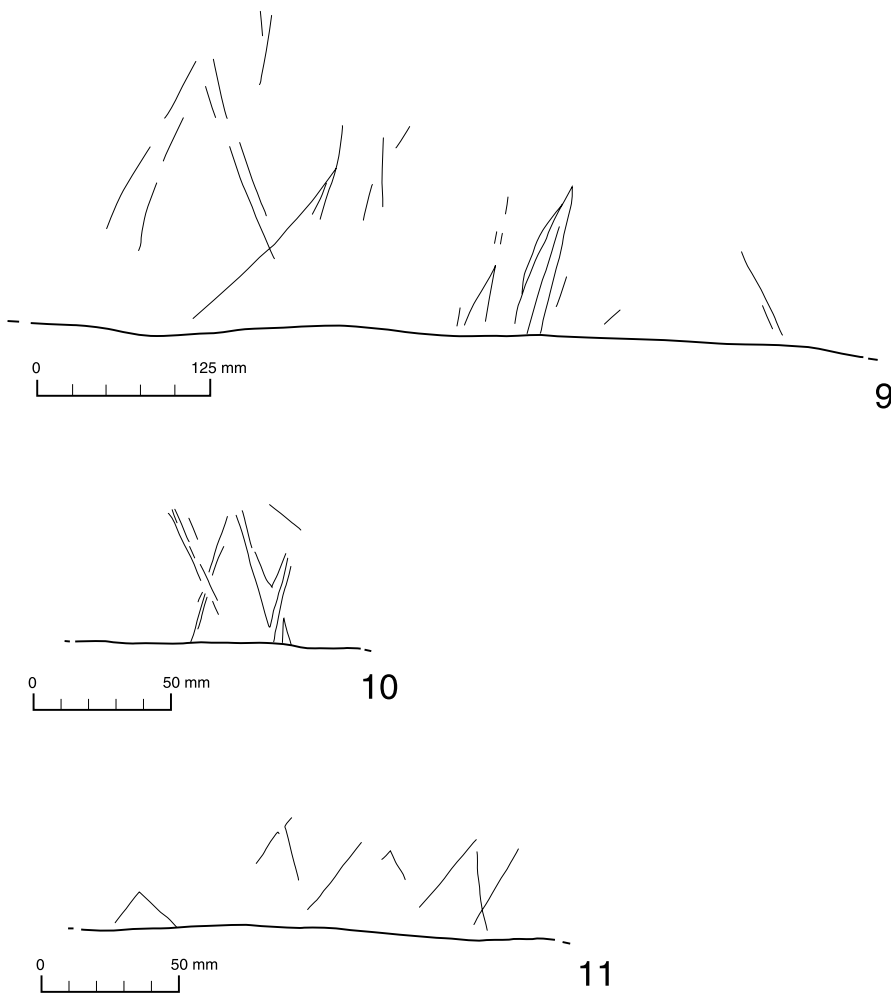


Figure 9. Incised motifs at Quoyness (6 and 7) and Wideford Hill (8). For positions in the tombs see Figure 7.



**Figure 10.** *Incised motifs at Wideford Hill. For positions in the tomb see Figure 7.*

sible that additional motifs still remain to be discovered. Because many of the carved stones were in poor condition, particularly those in Maeshowe, it was impossible to take rubbings or casts of these designs. Instead, they were recorded by accurate scale drawings.

Incised designs are found on two of the main rock types in Orkney: Stromness flagstone and Rousay flagstone. The motifs are characterized by fine lines, incised or scratched into the surface of the stone and, not surprisingly, their distribution is confined to the parts of the tombs that are better preserved. In many cases the surface of the rock has weathered or flaked away and at Viquoy Hill most of the tomb wall is covered in moss. The scratched decoration is indistinct and heavily patinated and contrasts sharply with recent graffiti at the same sites. The incised lines were never more than a milli-

metre wide and were usually much narrower. They barely penetrated the surviving surface of the stone and at first they were quite difficult to distinguish from natural cracks in the rock. Many of the incised motifs had been roughly sketched, with the result that several attempts were made to draw a particular line correctly. In other cases where they were used to compose angular motifs they overran their projected course and cut across one another slightly. The incised lines were not of a constant depth, although, with the exception of some of those at Maeshowe, each area of decoration had been created using only one tool, most probably a flint or quartz point; another possibility is the use of a haemetite nodule (Isbister 2000). The lines are so inconspicuous that they may have been simply sketches for designs in another medium. One obvious possibility is that the tomb walls had originally been painted. This is by no means implausible, as Childe identified what he called paint pots at Skara Brae, together with traces of red and white pigment

(Childe 1931, 134, 137, 144). The traces were investigated in 1999 by taking infra-red photographs of a number of the decorated surfaces in the tombs. This identified one area that may have retained traces of pigment, to the right of the entrance to the main chamber at Maeshowe. Its position corresponds with that of a semicircular design incised into the surface of the stone (Fig. 11:12). That is the only case in which traces of colouring may still survive. Otherwise, the exercise gave negative results.

In contrast to most of the pecked decoration, the incised motifs in the tombs were predominately angular rather than curvilinear. For the most part they comprised parallel lines, zigzags, chevrons, triangles and Vs. Only three of the designs included arcs. One of the incised motifs was discovered in Holm of Papa Westray South, the only surviving tomb with pecked designs (Fig. 8:4). These may have

formed part of a row of zigzags similar to those already recorded from the site, but the incised motifs are very much smaller than the others.

It seems as if there were two kinds of incised decoration at these sites. Some of these designs are small and self-contained. Often they are less than 10 cm across. Although they were carefully made, using a very fine line, they would never have been a conspicuous feature of the tombs. Others are much larger. On one of the lintels at Quoyness a zone of angular decoration extends for 85 cm (Fig. 8:5); the other panels on that site extend for 50 cm and 55 cm respectively (Fig. 9:6,7). Some of the decorated surfaces at Wideford Hill covered a similar area. One runs along the base of a large stone for nearly 60 cm (Fig. 10:9) and another is 30 cm in length and crosses the full width of a lintel 20 cm thick (Fig. 9:8). These seem to form part of a coherent overall design. The same is true of the pecked motifs that still survive inside Holm of Papa Westray South. The three designs which remain intact extend along the walls for between 30 cm and 1.2 m.

As so often, the evidence from Maeshowe introduces a further element. Close to the entrance to the main chamber there is a panel of incised decoration which covers an area of approximately 60 cm by 80 cm (Fig. 11:12). Unlike the others, it contains a wide variety of separate motifs, of very different sizes. These overlap one another and not all of them may have been made at the same time. This panel could once have been even larger, as part of the stone has flaked away.

### The authenticity of the incised motifs

The pecked designs in Orkney have been known since the 1850s, but the discovery of the incised motifs was unexpected and very few of them had been observed before. How can we be sure that they were prehistoric? There are some indications of their relative age. On one of the decorated stones inside Maeshowe, incised lines overlap a runic inscription. Barnes has suggested that this particular message had been defaced, perhaps because someone disagreed with the sentiments it expressed (1994, 71–7). Close observation suggests that in fact the ‘defacement’ is older than the runes. With the exception of one line that has been partially recut, this entire group of incisions was already in place when the runes were formed (Fig. 6). Elsewhere in the same tomb, parts of two incised triangles overlap with the well-known Norse drawing of a walrus (Fig. 12:16; Ashmore 1986, 62). Although they are unlikely to be

contemporary with one another, too little remains for their relationship to be established. There is another superimposition at Wideford Hill where an angular motif (Fig. 10:10) is cut by graffiti bearing the date 1883.

As Ashmore recognized in 1986, the incised motifs first found inside Maeshowe bear a striking resemblance to those associated with houses and portable artefacts in the Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae (Shee Twohig 1981, 286–90; Saville 1994; Ritchie 1995, ch. 4; Shepherd 2000). The comparison is even more appropriate in the light of the new discoveries reported here. Not only do the incised motifs resemble one another; examination of those on the surviving structures at Skara Brae show that they have been made by similar implements and were formed by exactly the same techniques.

Even so, Skara Brae is a very famous site and has been visited by many people. Is it possible that visitors have copied some of the prehistoric motifs found there, just as the tombs contain a number of modern runes imitating those at Maeshowe? This does not seem likely. Although Childe drew attention to the existence of incised designs at Skara Brae, he does not seem to have found them particularly interesting and he illustrated very few of them (Childe 1931, 150–2, pls. 53 & 54). The decoration is not easy to recognize and much of it has only been identified in recent years. The first thorough publication of this material dates from as recently as 1981 and it seems unlikely that such a specialized monograph (Shee Twohig 1981) could provide the source of inspiration for a generation of modern vandals.

### Chronology and context

How are the incised and pecked motifs related to the tombs? It has been clear for some time that the pecked images on these sites are confined to Maeshowe-type passage graves. We now believe that the same applies to the incised motifs, which occur in all but one of the chambers that are currently accessible. Our fieldwork was not confined to this group of monuments. In 1998 and 1999 every well-preserved chambered tomb in Orkney was examined in the field but no decoration whatever was found in the tripartite or stalled cairns, although it has to be said that much of their stonework was badly eroded. Nor was any found in the two tombs which have been described as intermediate forms: Isbister and Unstan. If the conventional chronology has any value, this would suggest that tomb decoration is confined to a

developed phase of the Orkney Neolithic.

That would be consistent with the distinctive forms of these motifs. The pecked decoration is both curvilinear and angular, but nearly all the incised motifs are angular designs, incorporating zigzags, triangles, chevrons and areas of lattice decoration. Although they have counterparts in Irish megalithic art, their closest parallels are found on Orkney itself. Identical motifs are very common on the house walls at Skara Brae where curvilinear decoration is absent. They are represented throughout the stratigraphic sequence at that site, which begins towards the close of the fourth millennium BC (Ashmore 1998; Shepherd 2000). They also occur on a variety of stone artefacts from Skara Brae (Saville 1994). There are some pecked designs there too, although better examples come from the excavated settlement at Pool (John Hunter pers. comm.).

The same elements also occur on Grooved Ware, the ceramic style which is found in some of the Maeshowe tombs. This provides a vital clue, as it now seems likely that the Grooved Ware pottery tradition originated in northern Britain and most probably in Orkney itself, where the stratified sequence at Pool suggests that it may have developed out of the long-established tradition of Unstan Ware (Hunter & MacSween 1991). More important, Grooved Ware can be subdivided into two successive phases. The first is characterized by incised motifs, whilst the later style found in Orkney is identified by applied decoration which gives the surface of the vessels more of a three-dimensional effect (MacSween 1992; Sheridan 1999). There seems little doubt that the closest parallels for the scratched decoration in the megalithic tombs lie in the earlier style of Grooved Ware which features most of the same elements, in particular chevrons and parallel lines. In that case it is tempting to suggest that the relatively rare pecked decoration found in the same group of monuments has its counterpart in the later Grooved Ware, but the evidence is too limited for this argument to be entirely convincing. On the other hand, it is worth noting that spirals appear occasionally in this tradition and that a 'horned' spiral very similar to those in Orkney tombs has recently been found on a Grooved Ware vessel in Oxfordshire dating from the very end of the Neolithic period (Barclay 1999, 12–14). There is more dating evidence from Yorkshire where the 'horned' spiral appears on one of the Folkton drums. This is important because the Folkton drums also include motifs found on Beaker pottery, similarly indicating a very late Neolithic date (Longworth 1999, 86–7).

### The structure of megalithic art in Orkney

Is it possible to tell whether the incised and pecked motifs were part of the original design of the later passage tombs? It is unlikely that many of the decorated stones were being reused. One of the incised motifs in Maeshowe extends across two courses of building material (Fig. 12:15) and the others are found in a small number of quite specific positions. With few exceptions, they are not located close to the chamber floor. In most cases the motifs occur in a band which extends from the lintels above the entrance passages to approximately the eye-level of an adult. This is especially true at Quoyness where two large stones with rather similar decoration are located at exactly the same height on separate sections of the chamber wall (Fig. 9:6, 7). In none of the sites are the motifs more than 2 m above the present chamber floor; and there is some evidence that the prehistoric floor level was once higher.

The few incised motifs found in the side cells occupy rather different positions, but the explanation may lie in the fact that these structures are more constricted and must be entered on hands and knees. Only two passage graves, Wideford Hill and Maeshowe, contain evidence of this kind but pecked decoration is recorded in a similar position inside Holm of Papa Westray South. Similarly, it is only at Maeshowe that any decoration has been recognized in the main entrance passage. The elaborately carved stone from Pierowall may have marked the tomb opening, but it had already been moved from its original position when the site was first identified (Sharples 1984, 102–5). Unfortunately, incised motifs would not be preserved in such an exposed location.

Despite the vagaries of preservation, these designs do seem to mark important thresholds within the structure of the tombs. Several locations appear to have been especially important. At Cuween Hill the lintel at the junction of the passage and main chamber had been selected for this purpose (Fig. 8:1), and at Quoyness and Wideford Hill there were incised motifs on the lintels above the entrances of the cells (Figs. 8:5 & 9:8). Only at Cuween Hill were the motifs arranged symmetrically above the passage itself. At Wideford Hill there was another incised design on the chamber wall above the position of the decorated lintel (Fig. 10:9) and at Quoyness a similar stone overlooked the entrance to one of the rear cells (Fig. 9:7). In this case the decorated surface was confined to an area directly above the limits of the passage. The pecked decoration at Holm of Papa Westray South shared some of these characteristics.

The largest area of motifs was on the lintel over the entrance to one of the cells. To judge from a nineteenth-century account, the decorated stone from Eday Manse may have been in a similar position, for it was found 'lying on its face at the entrance of one of the passages' (Davidson & Henshall 1989, 117).

Similar relationships extend to other parts of these monuments. A sill stone separating the main chamber from the right-hand cell at Cuween Hill may have been embellished (Fig. 8:3) and the same applies to the passages leading into two of the side chambers at Maeshowe, both of which were marked by a small group of incised lines (Fig. 12:18, 19). At Wideford Hill there were other areas of decoration close to the opening of the left-hand cell (Fig. 10:10) and over the lintel at the entrance of its counterpart on the other side of the main chamber (Fig. 10:11). In the same way, at Holm of Papa Westray South a panel of pecked motifs occurred beside the passage that communicated between the main chamber and its extension to the southwest.

At two of the sites, Wideford Hill and Holm of Papa Westray South, incised decoration was located on the wall directly opposite the end of the passage providing access to the main chamber. At Wideford Hill, where one of the lintels had been embellished, this may explain why the motifs were not disposed symmetrically above the entrance to the rear cell (Fig. 9:8); they were placed so as to be seen by someone entering the tomb. The same interpretation would apply to Holm of Papa Westray South where the only incised motif is opposite the entrance to one of the cells (Fig. 8:4). In this case it would be best seen by an individual looking into the main chamber, and that may be why the design is only 36 cm from the floor: this feature would have been invisible from the cell opening if the motifs had been further up the wall.

Other decorated stones may have been located in relation to the positions of deposits in the chambers, but in only one case does any evidence survive. This was at Quoyness where one of the decorated stones (Fig. 9:6) was located directly above the position of a pit, 20 cm deep, which had originally been covered by a stone. On excavation, it contained a series of human long bones (Davidson & Henshall 1989, 158). The incised panel is of particular interest as it is located 1.8 m above the chamber floor. It would have been difficult to decorate this surface whilst the pit was open, for that part of the wall would have been out of reach. It seems possible that the design owes its position to the deposit of human remains buried underneath it. Alternatively, the pit

was positioned so that it was below the decorated stone.

### Maeshowe (Figs. 11 & 12)

Few of the individual tombs have many motifs. There may once have been eleven stones with pecked motifs in Holm of Papa Westray South, but few of them can be found today. Incised motifs are still less frequent. There are four at Wideford Hill, three at Cuween Hill, three at Quoyness and one at Holm of Papa Westray South. In this case the exception is Maeshowe, with no fewer than eleven: two in the passages leading into the side cells, one in the main entrance passage and another eight in the central chamber. This is the only tomb where enough survives to allow a more ambitious analysis. (For a full account of the monument see Renfrew 1979, ch. 4; Davidson & Henshall 1989, 44–50, 142–6.)

In many respects Maeshowe follows the same pattern as the other monuments. Most of the motifs in the central chamber occur in a compact zone between the level of the cells and the eye level of an adult. There are two important exceptions: a rather sketchy motif occurs 2 m up the rear wall of the main chamber (Fig. 12:17) and another carved stone, the most finely executed of all, is close to the chamber floor (Fig. 12:21). Such a restricted zone of decoration is especially striking when we consider the unusual height of this chamber. The distribution of Neolithic motifs can be compared with that of the runic inscriptions which extends from a position only 80 cm from the floor to others at a height of no less than 3.6 m (Table 1).

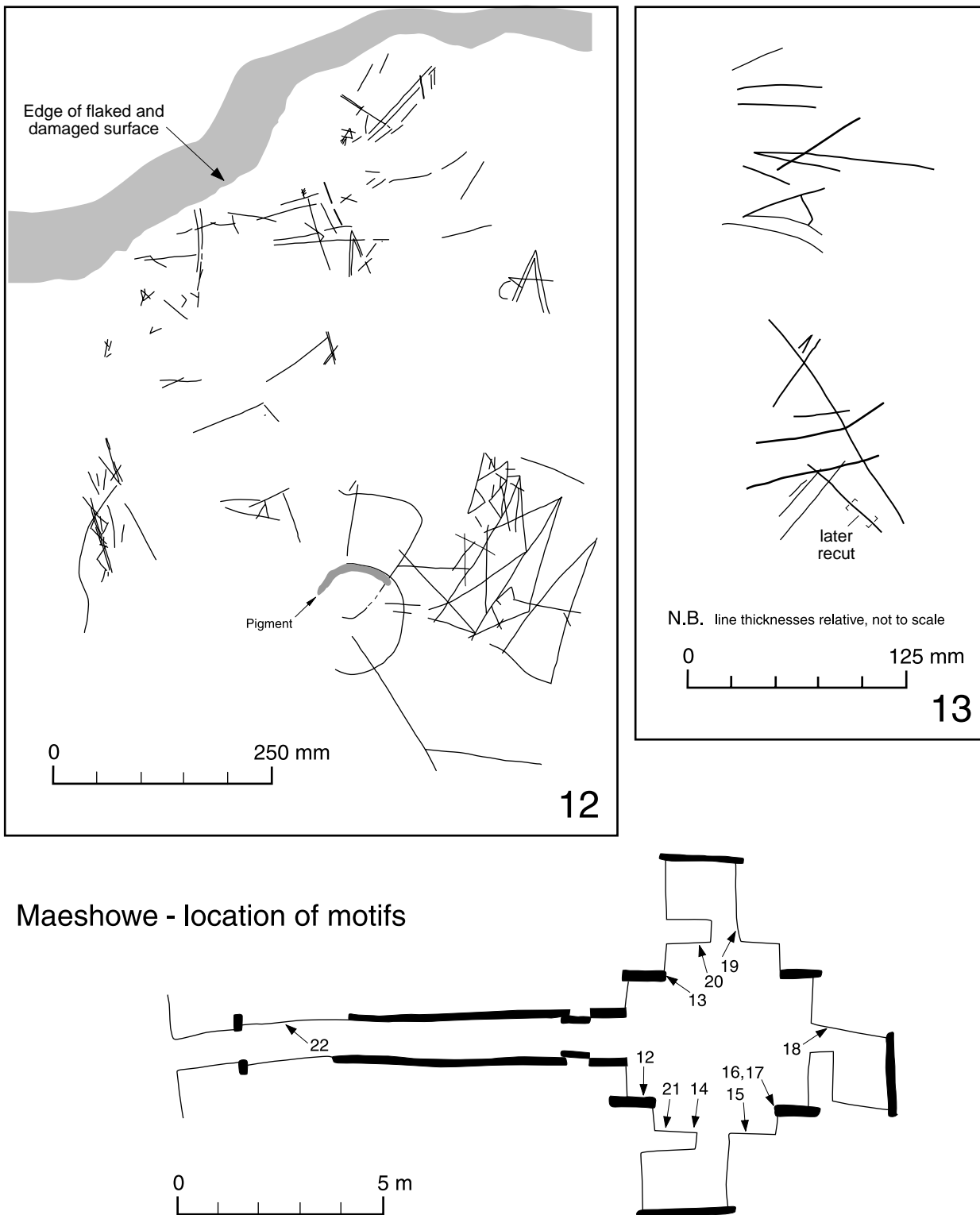
There is one incised motif on the left-hand side of the entrance passage (Fig. 12:22). All the others are located in the chamber or in the passages leading

**Table 1.** Height of Neolithic motifs and runic inscriptions above floor of the main chamber of Maeshowe. Note that the Neolithic designs in the passage and the entrances to the cells are excluded.

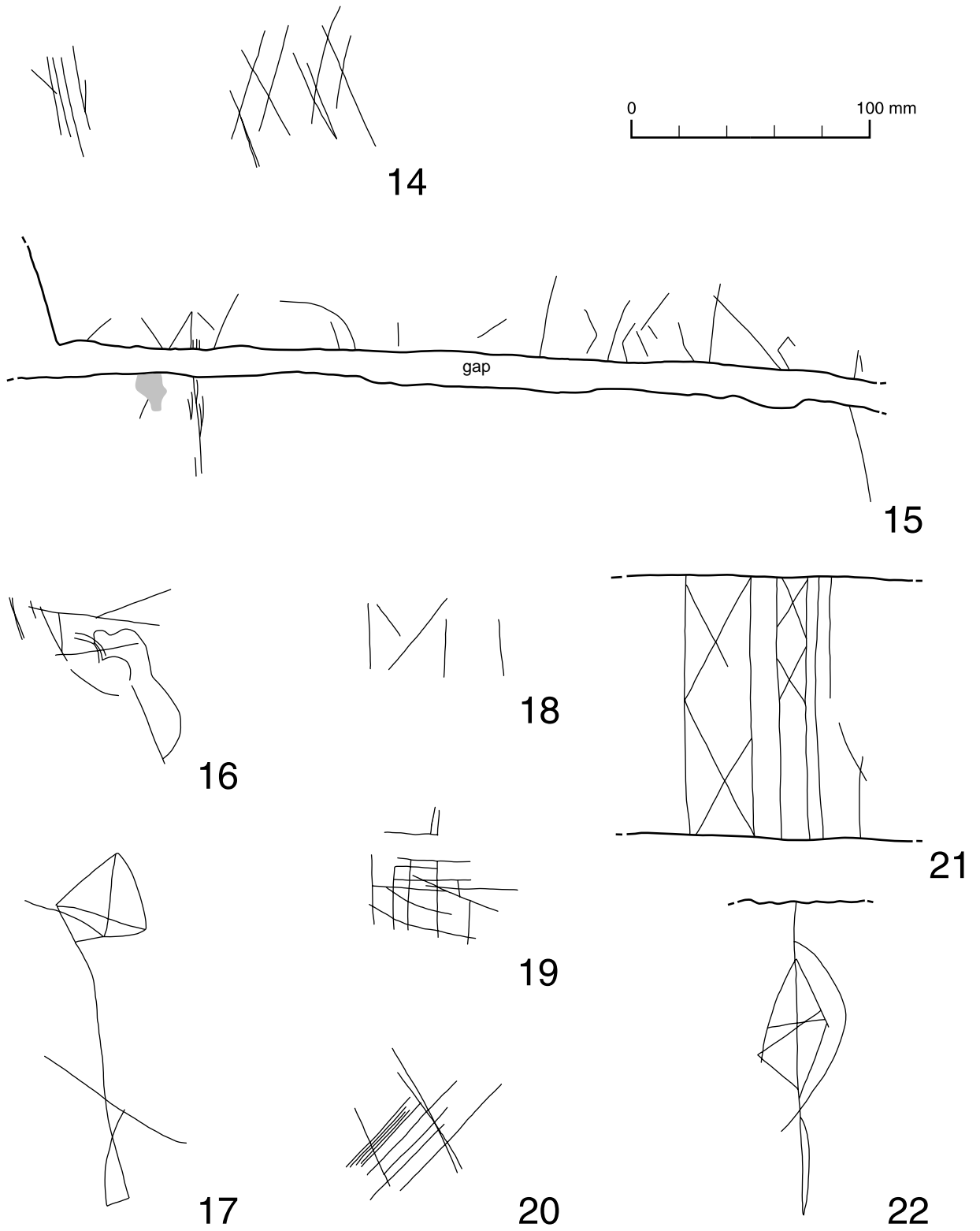
	Runic inscriptions (*)	Neolithic motifs
0–50 cm	–	1
51 cm–1.00 m	2	–
1.00–1.50 m	11	3
1.51–2.00 m	11	3
2.00–2.50 m	3	1
2.51–3.00 m	1	–
3.00–3.50 m	1	–
3.51–4.00 m	1	–

(\*) The figures relate to the midpoint of each inscription.





**Figure 11.** Positions of the incised motifs inside Maeshowe, with (above) detail of the two larger areas of decoration.



**Figure 12.** *Incised motifs inside Maeshowe. For positions in the tomb see Figure 11.*

into the cells. Perhaps the largest area of decoration is found on the massive stone pillar to the right of the main entrance to the chamber as one enters the tomb (Fig. 11:12). Not all the motifs may survive, for parts of the stone have flaked, and this panel is quite anomalous in representing a palimpsest of separate designs. These were of quite different sizes and seem to have been created using several different tools. The corresponding pillar on the opposite side of the entrance presents a different image, as the main surface does not seem to have been embellished, whilst its narrow face carries a band of incised motifs made with as many as three different tools (Figs. 6 & 11:13). Again, these designs may represent more than one phase of activity. Both these stones include a similar motif: a large inverted V which is sometimes depicted by a double line. The surfaces of the other pillars marking the corners of the chamber have not survived so well, although the right-hand rear pillar also carries two small areas of decoration (Fig. 11:16, 17). The dry-stone walls of the chamber provide further information. The right-hand side includes three areas of incised motifs, one of them extending across two separate stones (Fig. 12:14, 15, 21). Two of these panels (Figs. 11:12 & 12:21) had been executed with a skill that is not seen elsewhere at Maeshowe. By contrast, there was only one very small area of decoration on the left-hand side of the main chamber (Fig. 12:20). Another occurred nearby, just inside the entrance to a cell (Fig. 12:19). The back of the chamber was largely undecorated, although some of the stonework was badly damaged. Apart from the two motifs on the right-hand pillar, mentioned earlier, the only incised motifs were in the entrance to the rear cell (Fig. 12:18). One reason why so much of the structure was left untouched may be the use of pick-dressing (Eogan 1992). This seems to have embellished most of the major divisions of space inside the tomb, as well as the blocking stones for the separate chambers. Two different tools appear to have been employed here — a chisel and a punch — and, in contrast to the rest of the tomb, the dressing around the entrance of the right-hand cell seems to have been undertaken in two distinct phases.

These observations are consistent with what has been said about the other monuments. There is an important emphasis on thresholds in the structure of the tomb, and the area around the entrance to the central chamber seems to have been the subject of particular attention. Here, the two pillars share a similar motif and both stones may have been decorated on more than one occasion. At the same time, this evidence from the chamber introduces a further

issue, for at Maeshowe there seems to have been a distinct emphasis on the right-hand side. This is the only part of the monument where incised motifs occur close to the floor or high up on the wall and it is here that the largest and most carefully executed panels of decoration are found. There is even some evidence that, unlike its counterparts, the entrance to the right-hand cell was highlighted by pick-dressing on two separate occasions.

### Summary

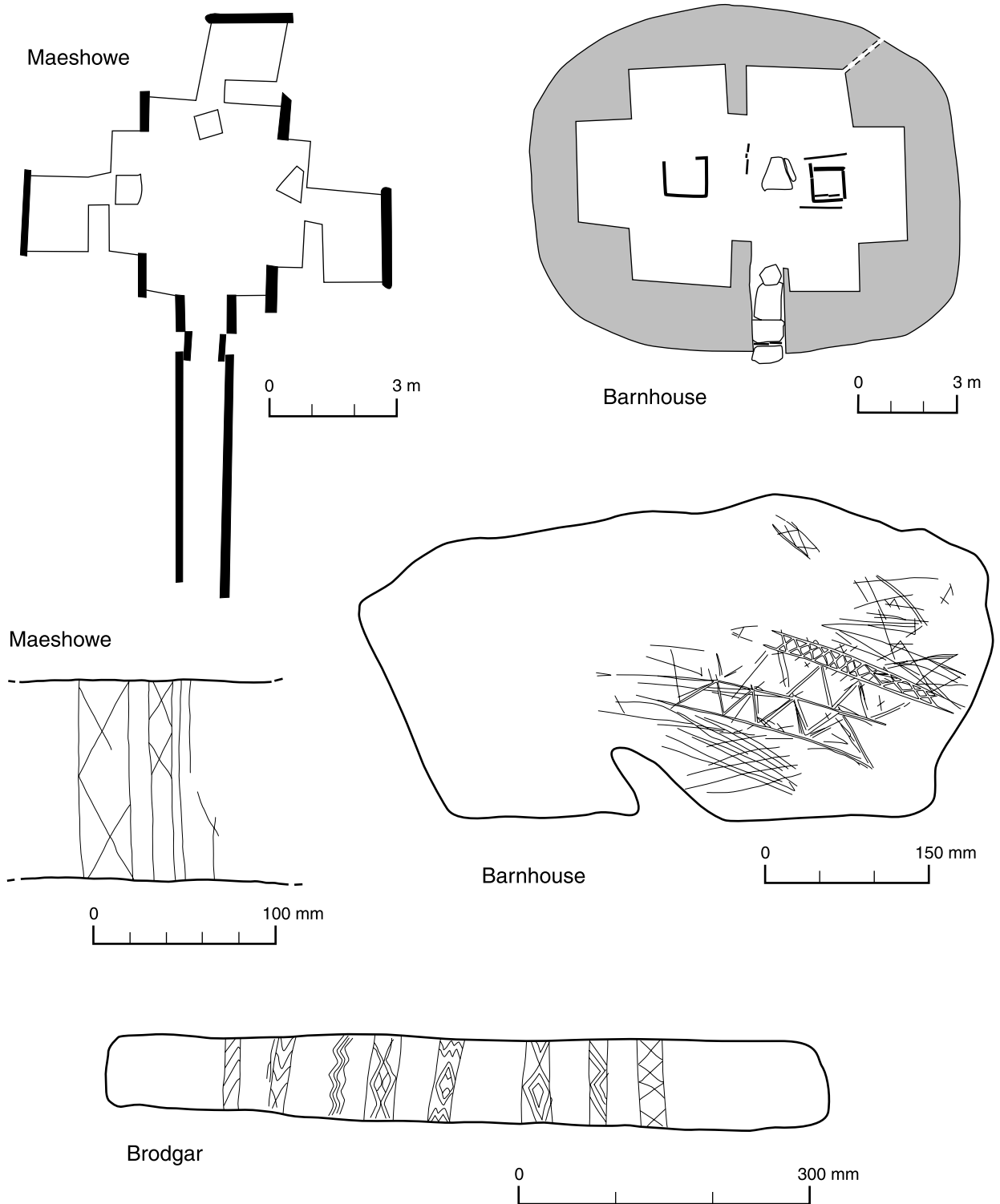
There are limits to this analysis for early records of the pecked art are confusing and we do not know the positions of some of the motifs observed at Holm of Papa Westray South in the nineteenth century. It cannot be proved that the decoration found in Maeshowe-type tombs was created when they were first built, but the location and character of the incised designs exhibit enough coherence to suggest that they were integrated into the active life of these monuments. Their positions relate to the experience of people moving around these buildings in a number of quite subtle ways and the placing of the motifs emphasises the sharp divisions of space that are the defining characteristic of these particular tombs. Virtually all the motifs in Orkney passage graves were located according to a few simple conventions.

### The wider context

#### *Houses and tombs*

These observations are significant because they provide the basis for a more ambitious analysis. Why do the motifs found inside Orkney passage graves have so much in common with those in other media? And how does this evidence differ from that in Ireland?

The close connections between houses and tombs in Neolithic Orkney have been apparent for some years (Hodder 1982, 218–20), but it is only in the later part of the sequence that they can be studied in much detail. By the Grooved Ware phase, late in the fourth millennium BC, it is clear that settlements were sometimes organized into villages, and that their positions in the landscape might be closely related to those of chambered cairns (Richards 1996). This is likely to have been the case with three of the monuments described here, Maeshowe, Cuween Hill and Wideford Hill, and current fieldwork suggests a similar pairing between the excavated tomb at Quanterness and a settlement at Crossiecrown. Maeshowe itself may have been built over the position of an earlier structure (Richards 1992b) and the



**Figure 13.** Simplified plans of the chamber at Maeshowe and a Grooved Ware house at Barnhouse, together with outline drawings of decorated stones from these two sites and of a cist slab from Brodgar.

passage grave at the Howe replaced a pair of stone buildings which were most probably houses (Ballin-Smith 1994, 11–13).

The internal plans of such houses have many features in common with the layout of the Maeshowe tombs. They share similar orientations. Moreover, they can be approached by low passages, their walls contain a number of recesses or cells and in some cases their internal area is subdivided so that the right-hand part of the structure achieves a greater prominence (Richards 1991). Links between the organization of space inside Maeshowe itself and the layout of the larger houses within the nearby settlement of Barnhouse are particularly obvious (Fig. 13).

Such connections go even further. Usually Maeshowe tombs were divided between a main chamber and a series of separate cells. Few of these cells were linked to one another; instead, each of them had to be approached through a narrow passage from the central part of the monument. Little is known about the layout of Grooved Ware villages in Orkney, but it may be no coincidence that the settlement at Barnhouse consisted of a ring of buildings surrounding a central space (Richards 1992b). It seems quite possible that the ground plan of the Maeshowe tombs followed a similar principle. The ground plan may even have represented the settlement as a whole.

The houses associated with Grooved Ware contain a few pecked motifs, but incised decoration is much more common (Shee Twohig 1997). It is very similar to that inside the tombs, but the possibilities of making a closer comparison are limited by differences of preservation. The house walls at Skara Brae survive unusually well, but at most of the other sites little remains but the foundations. There are numerous decorated stones at Skara Brae, some of them still in position, but similar evidence may not have survived at the other settlements. Even so, a decorated stone was found in a surface layer at Barnhouse (Fig. 13; Richards 1991) and two others came from the excavated settlement at Pool, one of them decorated with pecked lines very similar to those on a fragment from the Howe (Ritchie 1995, fig. 49; John Hunter pers. comm.; Ballin-Smith 1994, 209–10).

Some of the decorated stones at Skara Brae have obviously been moved from their original positions and others may have been reused (Shepherd 2000). Even so, there seems to be some coherence to their distribution. It is likely that those that remain *in situ* were chiefly used to mark important thresholds in the layout of the settlement: passages, doorways and the entrances of cells (Richards 1991, 30–32 and fig. 2.1; Shee Twohig 1997). They are most common in

House 8, which seems to have played a specialized role in the life of the settlement, and House 7, which was the only structure directly associated with human burials (Childe 1931, 140–42). The decorated stones appear to have marked significant divisions of space and, like their counterparts in the chambered tombs, were located in positions where they would have been viewed by people moving around the built area.

The same range of visual imagery extends to the artefacts found at these sites. Again, the most abundant source is the well-preserved deposits at Skara Brae. Domestic pottery shows some of the closest links with the designs found in the tombs. Jones (1999) has recently studied the ceramic assemblage from Barnhouse and found that the motifs that have most in common with ‘megalithic art’ are confined to the small vessels used for serving food. They do not occur on the large storage pots or on those employed for cooking. The images seem to have played a part in social transactions within the settlement itself.

These connections suggest that the incised decoration employed in Orkney passage tombs made a direct reference to the domestic sphere. It forged another link between the living and the dead, and emphasized the parallel between the organization of the tomb and that of domestic buildings. Incised motifs that had their closest counterparts in the houses were used to emphasize similar divisions of space inside the tombs.

Just as the designs found in the settlements may have operated at a number of different levels, from the house to the individual artefact, their counterparts in the tombs were by no means homogeneous. The larger panels would have been conspicuous and easy to find, especially if they had originally been painted, but the smaller motifs were very different. Perhaps these were more private images, referring to individuals or to single households. The contrast between these two groups is obvious but is difficult to interpret with any confidence.

In one case it is possible to suggest a still more direct connection. It seems likely that the passage grave at Maeshowe was organized according to similar principles to the main buildings in the settlement at Barnhouse (Figs. 11 & 13; Richards 1993). These similarities extend to the emphasis placed on the right-hand side of the tomb, where a finely decorated stone (Fig. 12:21) occurs. This has several incised motifs, but, with a single possible exception (Fig. 12:18), it is more formal than the other designs at this site. The unusually small stone is set into the



foundations of the main chamber by the end of the right-hand wall. The design is unusual in Orkney, yet it has two very striking parallels in the immediate vicinity of Maeshowe: the decorated stone found in the Barnhouse settlement (Fig. 13; Richards 1991); and the cist slab from Brodgar (Fig. 13; Marwick 1926). Ritchie has suggested that the Brodgar piece was not in its original context and that it had been moved there from the Neolithic village of Barnhouse (1995, 69). The decorated stone inside Maeshowe (Fig. 13), small in size and exceptional in its position, could also have been reused. Were the connections between the settlement and the tomb reinforced by placing a relic from one of the houses in the foundations of what was surely the greatest monument in Orkney?

### Megalithic art in Orkney and Ireland

So far this discussion has emphasized the importance of the incised motifs. What can be said about the pecked designs inside these tombs? These are still more difficult to interpret and might belong to a later phase in the embellishment of passage graves. That argument is not securely based as it depends upon comparison with pottery decoration. On the other hand, stones with pecked decoration are known from two of the excavated settlements: Pool (Ritchie 1995, 68, L; John Hunter pers. comm.) and Skara Brae (Shee Twohig 1981, 286–90; 1997), even though curvilinear designs do not occur there. The technique of stone carving also shows some similarities with the later style of megalithic art in Ireland (O'Sullivan 1989).

The pecked designs on Orkney have long been compared with those in Irish passage graves. The cup marks, rings and zigzags are common elements in Irish tomb decoration, but the most distinctive feature of the Orkney sites is the 'horned' spiral which is only found in the unusual Irish monument at Millin Bay (Collins & Waterman 1955, fig. 8). There are other rather doubtful examples on natural surfaces in County Kerry (Van Hoek 1993, fig. 1.4; O'Sullivan & Sheehan 1996, fig. 48), and this design is also represented on the decorated mace head from Knowth, which Eogan (1992) specifically compares to artefacts from Britain. Otherwise this motif seems to be more common in coastal areas of Scotland, England and Wales and appears on a variety of structures and natural rock outcrops. These include the Temple Wood stone circle (Scott 1989, fig. 12), the passage grave of Barclodiad y Gawres (Lynch 1967) and what may have been the remains of another

chambered tomb, the Calderstones (Forde-Johnston 1957).

Until recently the Orkney incised motifs were difficult to compare with similar designs in Ireland, but the situation has changed with a recent study of the sequence of images in the decorated tombs of the Boyne Valley (Eogan 1997; 1999). This has shown that the earliest decoration consisted of incised motifs. These were entirely angular and took the form of triangles, lozenges and zigzags.

These, or some of them, might have had a functional role in outlining an area that was to be infilled with picking. However, the interiors of some incised lozenges and triangles are not always picked and in some examples that have been picked there is a gap between the edge of the picking and the incised line . . . The evidence suggests that incised lines were not just guidelines but motifs in their own right (Eogan 1997, 222–3).

In some cases incised designs were overlain by pecked motifs which took no account of the original decorative scheme.

Eogan suggests that in the principal tomb at Knowth the incised designs are a particular feature of the chambers and the innermost sections of the passages and that the decorated kerb was a later development (Eogan 1997, 232–4). This also suggests comparisons with Orkney since the kerbstones exhibit the greatest amount of curvilinear decoration. This was executed by pecking. It seems as if the successive designs seen in the megalithic art of Knowth follow a comparable sequence to the development of Grooved Ware in Orkney.

There are other elements in the Orkney passage graves that recall the situation in Ireland, such as the layout of the decorated surfaces. In both regions greater emphasis was placed on the right-hand part of the chamber (Shee Twohig 1996). This is certainly true at Loughcrew and in the Boyne Valley, but on Orkney is restricted to two exceptional sites: the passage grave at Maeshowe and the rock-cut tomb of the Dwarfie Stane (Davidson & Henshall 1989, 44–50, 114–15, 142–6). The comparison is all the more appropriate because the surfaces inside both of these monuments had been dressed by picking. At Maeshowe, the entrance of the right side cell was embellished in two separate phases, whilst the structural details of the right-hand chamber at the Dwarfie Stane were defined using the same kind of tool. This may be significant as the last phase of stone-working inside the tombs in the Boyne Valley took a similar form (Eogan & Aboud 1990). It was at this stage that some of the earlier decoration was effaced.

Eogan (1992) has already made the important point that the strongest links between the passage graves of Ireland and Orkney are those between Newgrange and Knowth on the one hand, and Maeshowe on the other. These may have come towards the end of the period of tomb-building in both areas. It is clear, however, that Grooved Ware, the style of decorated pottery which seems to have originated in Orkney, was not used in the Boyne Valley until a later date (Eogan & Roche 1997; 1999; for another view see Brindley 1999).

In other respects there is a contrast between those two regions. In particular, some of the tombs were located in quite different positions. We have seen how the Maeshowe tombs were built close to settlement sites and how two of these monuments might even have been erected over house-sites. The Irish evidence is rather different. The large passage graves, which are thought to be among the later monuments, are seldom associated with occupation sites and some were located on hills or mountain tops at a remove from the inhabited area (Bergh 1995). They form conspicuous landmarks that are visible from a great distance away. The cairns are sometimes grouped into cemeteries in which the individual monuments are carefully placed in relation to features of the natural topography (Fraser 1998).

In keeping with this emphasis on conspicuous positions and long-distance views, there is a striking emphasis on the use of non-local materials. Some of the stones used at Newgrange and Knowth had been brought a considerable distance (Mitchell 1992; Eogan 1999, fig. 14). In particular, quartz blocks were used to emphasize the exterior of the cairns. A similar emphasis was given by the provision of external kerbs, which in some of the later tombs were lavishly decorated. It seems as if the passage graves were designed to impress an audience, many of whom may never have seen inside them (Bradley 1999). By contrast, the megalithic art of Orkney was restricted to the interior and only at Pierowall could any of the designs have been observed on the exterior of the monument, though even there, the interpretation is conjectural (Sharples 1984, 102–5).

As we have seen, the large areas of pecked decoration at Irish tombs seem to be later in date than incised motifs and are entirely abstract. They include a number of images that resemble those reported in societies that practise some form of shamanism (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1993). Some of the parallels are highly specific (Dronfield 1995), and concern both angular and curvilinear decoration. Dronfield (1996) has argued that lattice decoration

within these monuments was strongly associated with deposits of human remains. He also suggests that the concentration of circles and spirals associated with the entrance passages may evoke the sensation of travelling into solid rock which is commonly experienced in altered states of consciousness. A few of the motifs associated with these monuments also occur in open-air rock art (Johnston 1993; Bradley 1999). The later passage graves in Ireland may have been thought of in similar terms to caves and natural rock formations. This could explain both the siting of these monuments and the use that was made of special raw materials.

That is rather different from the situation on Orkney. Although the designs found in Orkney megalithic tombs show a certain resemblance to those in Ireland, the specific motifs that Dronfield identifies with subjective vision do not occur there. Instead we find rather simpler abstract designs that have a wider currency in the domestic domain. Their closest counterparts are on the walls of houses and among the artefacts used in daily life. That is not to deny the similarities between the decorated sites in Orkney and Ireland, yet even where the designs resemble one another they must have been understood in different ways. If the Irish evidence suggests that megalithic 'art' might have celebrated the passage of the deceased into another world, on Orkney it helped to create a sense of community in which the deceased remained involved in the everyday activities of the living.

That may explain why the motifs associated with settlement sites were also used to decorate the houses of the dead.

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### Note

1. Since this article was submitted, an important volume on Neolithic Orkney has appeared (Ritchie 2000). A

number of the chapters are of direct relevance to our article. We were able to read Shepherd's paper before completing our own, and it is cited in the bibliography. The reader is also directed to the chapters by Renfrew, Hunter and Ashmore on the chronology of Neolithic Orkney, to those by Jones & Richards and Barber on the significance of chambered tombs, and, most especially, to Isbister's contribution on the use of naturally occurring pigments during this period. Quite independently of our study, she suggests that the incised motifs at Skara Brae are the last remains of panels of coloured decoration and, in particular, that the scratched designs at that site 'could have been created using a single haematite nodule, and are merely the bare remains of once crayoned and painted designs' (p. 194).

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