

# The Post Hole

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The Post Hole is a student run journal for all those interested in archaeology. It aims to promote discussion and the flow of ideas in the department of Archaeology for the University of York and the wider archaeological community. If you would like to get involved with the editorial process, writing articles or photography then please get in touch via email – (<mailto:editor@theposthole.org>).

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# 1 Mud and Legend: The Archaeology of Mythology

Katharine Newman (<mailto:kan501@york.ac.uk>)

[The realm of myth and magic] is a dangerous field: fairies abound, good fairies and bad fairies, dragons and dragon-slayers, gods and goddesses, truth and untruth, history and legend, science and fiction, inextricably mixed and fused. But what has archaeology to do with it, you will say? Archaeology is concerned with bones and flints, with pots and pans and post-holes, with stone and metal, in short, with the material remains and spades to dig them up with. (Tritsch 1970, 1)

## What is a Myth?

Myth (noun)

1. A traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, esp. one that is concerned with deities and demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature
2. Stories or matter of this kind: *realm of myth*.
3. Any invented story, idea or concept: *His account of the event is pure myth*.
4. An imaginary or fictitious thing or person
5. An unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution.

(anon n.d.)

A myth, a mere story, can seem to be far from a resource that we, as members of the increasingly scientifically-minded discipline of archaeology, would deign to utilise. Yet myths are not always as grounded in the realms of fantasy as they might seem, at first glance, to be. In the course of this article I hope to ‘explore the possibilities of developing an interdisciplinary dialogue, and making this dialogue fruitful to the future development of both disciplines’ (Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf 1999, 4). In order to accomplish this, two case studies will be analysed where mythology has had an impact on archaeology, in two very different ways. Firstly, there is the case of Troy, where the work of a Grecian poet has informed the archaeology of a site in Turkey, and secondly, the site of Cossington in Leicester, where an excavation has unearthed evidence of mythology in practice. And perhaps, somewhere along the way, you will come to believe that the union of archaeology and mythology is far from being grounded in the world of fairytales...

## Troy

The city of Troy, and the associated Trojan war, has been the subject of European mythology for over three thousand years (Latacz 2004, vii). Troy and the Trojan war are, of course, famous for their being the focus of the Iliad, a poem composed in about 700 B.C. by the Grecian, Homer (Latacz 2004, 3), a work which first sparked the mythological status of the city. The poem itself was composed about 450 years after the fall of Troy, and some of the many questions that both historians and archaeologists alike have asked concern the extent to which Homer's work can be regarded as historically correct, and whether the current archaeological site of Hisarlık on the Dardanelles, is indeed the 'Troy' of Homer's Iliad (Latacz 2004, 2-3).

It is argued that Hisarlık, or Troy's, 'connection with myth, the world of imagination and illusion, is the very origin of archaeology as a scientific discipline' (Korfmann 2007, 23), the intrigue and mystery surrounding the city and its past, driving archaeologists to find new ways to uncover its secrets. Despite this, however, the excavations undertaken at the city have never been aimed towards 'contributing answers to questions about the Iliad or the Trojan War' (Korfmann 2007, 23), indeed it has often been the deliberate intention of those working on the site to keep the two, the myth and the archaeology, separate as a matter of principle (Korfmann 2007, 23). While the Iliad may not, therefore, be a source of information about the city of Troy at the time that Homer's poem is set, it does nonetheless provide us with an insight into what the ruins of Troy must have looked like some 450 years later, when Homer was composing the Iliad (Korfmann 2007, 23). Indeed, it stands to reason that 'Homer and those from whom he may have derived some of his information are witnesses of what the topographical setting and life in the late eighth century B.C. were like' (Korfmann 2007, 23), as Homer's audience would have had access to the impressive ruins of Troy, as they stood then, and would have needed to recognise in those ruins the Troy of Homer's Iliad. Therefore, the myth of Troy inspired subsequent archaeological investigations and it has even been postulated that it was instrumental in the emergence of archaeology as a scientific discipline. Furthermore, while the direct excavation of the purported site of Troy and its relation to the myth inspired by Homer's Iliad have been deliberately kept separate, the Iliad has nonetheless proved to be archaeologically informative in at least one regard, that of how the site of Troy appeared topographically in the eighth century B.C. and provided a limited insight into daily life at that time.

## The Cossington Round Barrows

An illustration of the creation of myth in archaeology can be found slightly closer to home in the example of the use and re-use of three Bronze Age round barrows at Cossington, in Leicestershire. Of the three barrows found at the site, Barrow 3 alone appears to have been the focus of later attention, having formed the 'focus for Iron Age settlement and . . . [been] clearly referenced in the laying out of several later prehistoric land boundaries' (Thomas 2008, 129). It was also the focus of a more spiritual form of attention, as there is a tradition of deliberate deposits on the site that persists well into the Roman period (Thomas 2008, 129). These deposits are interpreted as being 'carefully negotiated interactions with the barrow, either in deference to its association with the supernatural or

as a way of manipulating the past to mark associations with the 'ancestors' (Thomas 2008, 129).

In the later Anglo-Saxon period, following Barrow 3 as the focus of the Iron Age settlement, the monument was restored to its original relationship with the dead and reinstated as a burial ground (Thomas 2008, 129). John Thomas states that it is likely that this later phase of re-use stems from either 'a desire to be associated with a mythical past to create a sense of place in the landscape (Bradley 1987), or to invent specific histories for local communities (Williams 2006, 183)' (cited in Thomas 2008, 129). Therefore we can see that, even without the glamour and instant sense of intrigue and fascination aroused by the myth surrounding Troy, landmarks such as round barrows within the British landscape were a focus for the mythology of later peoples, seeking to associate themselves with the 'ancestors' who created such monuments. The change in usage from their initial creation as places of burial, to being the focus of settlement in a later period and then returning once again to their original function provides us with a wonderful illustration of how the myth surrounding a monument or site can be changed and moulded over time, not only by the selectivity of what is accurately remembered and transmitted through the ages, but also by the desires and motives of those who follow, whether they are invaders striving to assert their claim over the land or simply those who want to associate themselves more strongly with the peoples who preceded them. Indeed, John Thomas summarises the situation eloquently when he states that 'the memories and mythologies involved in the life stories of the monuments provides a reflection of changing attitudes as occupation of the landscape increased. It is clear that the monuments held high importance to their creators and rather than becoming static landmarks of past occupation, their significance was retained, remembered, and redefined by later groups wishing to stake a claim on the Cossington landscape' (Thomas 2008, 129).

## Conclusion

Archaeology and mythology are two fields that it can seem almost impossible to combine the material, earthly remains that we can find, study and catalogue versus the ephemeral, long-distant interpretations and stories concerning people and places that can seem to have lost all meaning in the modern world. Yet the two are more intrinsically linked than they seem the two case studies shown here demonstrate two very different ways in which archaeology and mythology can be seen to compliment one another.

In the case of Troy, we can see that the ancient work of Homer has informed archaeologists about a period in history they otherwise would have known little about, and possibly even inspired the very scientific nature of the discipline. Furthermore, in the case of the Cossington round barrows the archaeology itself has informed us about the mythology surrounding the later re-use of the site. In these two ways, mythology informing archaeology and archaeology informing mythology, we can see a fascinating relationship forming. One thing to take away from this paper, if nothing else, is that archaeology isn't a dead and dry subject, concerned purely with material remains we need to see beyond the bones, broken pots and barrows that we find and into the lives that they could have lived through the centuries we need to look for the archaeology of mythology.

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## 2 The Staffordshire Hoard: a bounty of the kings?

Phillip Showell (mailto:ps610@york.ac.uk)

The Staffordshire hoard is the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver found to date. Officially it has been declared treasure, and museums are currently in the process of deciding whether to bid for the items. It was found by metal detectorist Terry Herbert on July 5th 2009 who, after unearthing a few items and several earthen lumps that he resisted the urge to open himself, contacted the archaeologists. While it may be easy to condemn the amateur metal detector community from a professional standpoint, it is important to realise that these items had entered the plough soil after particularly deep ploughing. This dredged the items up, allowing for their location and removal. Had the items remains unploughed, they would have been “atomised”, as Dr. Kevin Leahy, Finds Adviser for the Portable Antiquities Scheme points out.

This collection is special; it has captured imaginations and hears and brought tears to eyes. After witnessing the collection personally, it is certainly a sight to behold. The physical splendour of these items is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. It is the significance of these items that this article hopes to address. The hoard itself has been quoted as being more significant than Sutton Hoo as far as our understanding of Anglo-Saxons goes, in particular their crafts and the metalwork they were capable of producing. The hoard consists of well in excess of 1,500 objects. Interestingly, none of the artefacts are thought to be feminine in their function. Rather, they are all associated with masculine uses. For example, there is an excessive amount of sword fittings, including 84 pommels and 135 hilt plates. Most of these are constructed from gold and are either worked with a filigree design or are inlaid with deep red garnets in the cellular jewellery style that would have been the utmost skill of the Anglo-Saxon craft.

What does this mean? Many of the items show signs that they have been torn from where they were mounted; rivets and pins on the sword hilts are still bent from where they were once attached. This damage does not seem malicious though, many of the items such as the gold cross and Latin inscribed strip would have been utterly destroyed had this been the case. The damage seems to have been incurred as the pieces were removed by force from their mounting, probably in looting after a battle. It would seem that these items were coveted and kept after the conflict, rather than being destroyed for ritual reasons. This does not of course rule out that they were not buried as some form of votive offering, merely that they were not destroyed totally for this purpose. Instead, it seems that damaged items like the cross were bent to allow ease of carrying.

This does seem relevant. The hoard is located in the heart of Mercia and with estimations placing the items in or around the 7th century. This was period of quite aggressive expansionist rule by the Kings Penda, Wulfhere and Aethelred, so the military hoard should come as little surprise. Perhaps this “treasure” as the popular media calls it was indeed the personal hoard of one of these illustrious Kings, perhaps buried to protect it from the grasps of others and never retrieved. Other manifold theories have been offered that are too verbose and complex to discuss here, needless to say that this is a recent discovery and information goes out of date very fast. It is certainly one that I for one shall enjoy

keeping up to date with. The story is constantly evolving, the interpretation constantly forming out of the mists of history and the ideas of what these items represented and to whom they once belonged remained an enigma that many will work to crack. It remains to be seen how much they will sell for, or where they will finally end up resting. Whoever has the biggest bid, it is my firm belief that such items and the impact they have made on our understanding of Anglo-Saxons along with the potential understanding they have yet to give is, and always will be, without a value that we can place on it.

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### **3 To what extent is the divide between public and private life reflected in Roman Italy? (Part 2)**

Megan Lewis (<mailto:mhl771@bham.ac.uk>)

#### **Temples and Ritual**

Temples were obviously divided into public and private areas, in a similar way to houses. Temples as we see them today are generally in a state of ruin, with none of the walls remaining and often only a few columns. This often gives the misleading impression of being very open structures. As we can see from the Temple of Romulus from the forum in Rome, temples would have been enclosed buildings with doors that could be shut to preserve privacy (Figure 1). Even when the doors were open, the cella was still a private area and as many temples were built on a platform it would not have been visible from the street. Temples connected to mystery cults seem to have required privacy. The Mithraeum of the Severn Spheres in Ostia was built behind the Republican Sacred Area. It is easily visible now but would not have been when the other temples were standing. The Temple of Isis in Pompeii was surrounded by a large wall so that non-initiates could not see into the temple from outside.



*Figure 1 – Entrance of the Temple of Romulus, Rome (Credit: author).*

The most obviously public part of a temple is the altar. In many places they are situated on the stairs leading up to the entrance, almost on the street. Animal sacrifices would have been visible to anyone walking past and the ceremonies may have regularly blocked streets (Figure 5). This is similar to the semi-public nature of private sacrifices within the home. Sacrifices to Vesta were made after the first course of the mid-day meal and it is likely that the whole family would have been present (Grant 1970, 57). Houses generally had household shrines, used to worship household gods called ‘Lares’. The shrines are a similar shape to temples and are often beautifully decorated (Figure 3).

Although the Lares were household gods and therefore within the private sphere of life, Pompeii has a large public temple dedicated to them within the forum. The sanctuary seems to have been dedicated to them as guardians of the city, rather than the home. As the Lares protected the private family and household, the public Lares protected the city as one large household (Woolf 2003, 206).

Private religion was also practised in public temples, as individuals could make their own offerings. The temples themselves were considered offerings when built by an individual, but offerings included things like statuary, pottery and altars. Models of body parts were commonly offered at temples dedicated to Asclepius in the hope that the god would heal them. These included models of genitalia which are related to fertility problems (Figure 4). Offerings to Isis from sailors are known in connection to her role as 'Isis Shipsaver'.

Altars were also commissioned by private citizens either as offerings to the god to which they were dedicated or as funerary altars in honour of the dead. The most important altar in public worship in Rome was the Ara Pacis. Erected by the Senate in place of a triumphal arch to honour Augustus' return from Italy, it shows the emperor as high priest of the city and is dedicated to peace as a goddess (Figure 5). It was not purely decorative and would have been used for sacrifices during public festivals. Originally it was in the Field of Mars and would have been in view of the Pantheon, a temple dedicated to all Roman gods. The Ara Pacis also had political connotations. Showing Augustus as high priest indicates that he is the man who restored traditional religion to Rome. The obelisk also placed in the Field of Mars was a monument to Apollo and it has been calculated that on Augustus' birthday, its shadow would have pointed at the centre of the Ara Pacis, suggesting that his birth brought an era of peace (information from Museo Dell'Ara Pacis).



*Figure 2 – Household altar in the House of the Large Fountain, Pompeii (Credit: author).*



*Figure 3 – Votive offerings found in the Tiber (Credit: author, Figure 4 – Temple of Fortuna Augusta showing the altar, Pompeii (Credit: author)).*

So...does the archaeological evidence for public worship reflect the divide between public and private life? I believe the answer is yes, but only to a certain extent. The division of space within temples reflects that of private houses in that both have public and private areas, where the private areas are only accessible by certain people. In the case of temples, the cella is only accessible by the priest or priestess. The practise of 'showing-off' one's wealth and piety in public is also reflected in things such as the commissioning of temples or offerings. In Roman houses, the most elaborate decoration is generally in the public areas so that visitors would see how wealthy you were. In a similar fashion, being able to commission a temple or an elaborate altar shows publically your wealth and dedication to the gods.



*The Ara Pacis (Credit: author).*

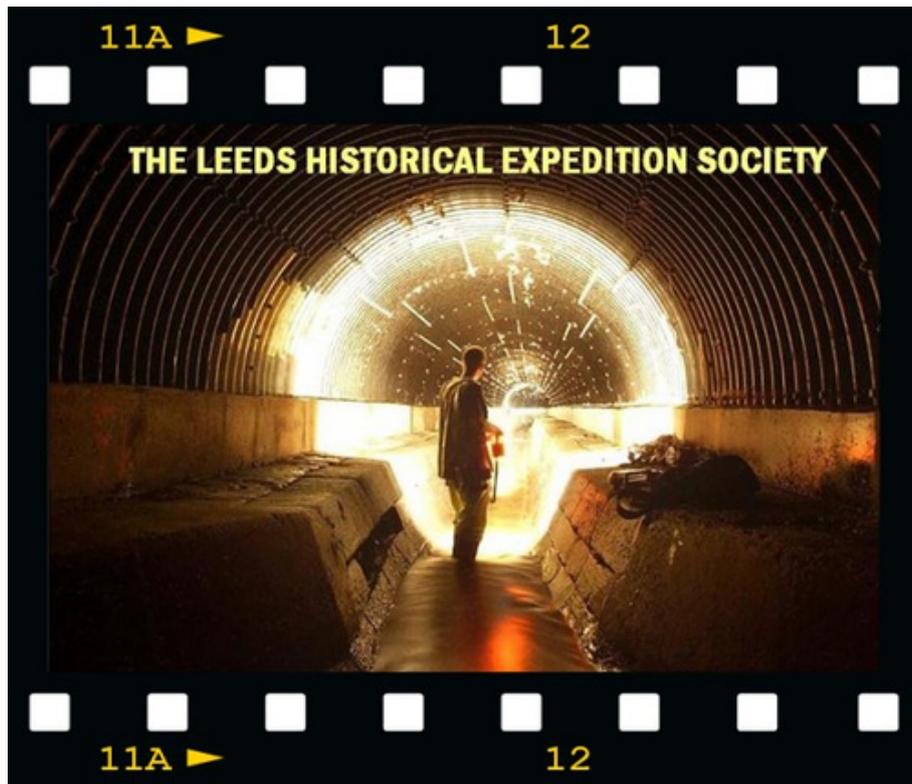
There is also evidence that seems to blur the public and private divide somewhat. The Shrine of the Public Lares in Pompeii is a public shrine to what are usually private, household gods. The fact that the shrine is in the forum, next to the Temple of Vespasian and close to the Temple of Jupiter shows that it was obviously a popular public cult as well.

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## 4 Urban Exploration; boldly going where millions have gone before.

Adam Cliff (<mailto:ac593@york.ac.uk>)



*Figure 1 – Leeds historical expedition society (Credit: Davidson, P.).*

I first came across Phill Davison on a website called 'Secret Leeds', a site dedicated to 'investigating quirky, unusual or mysterious aspects of the built environment of the city of Leeds, both past and present'. Phill is a very active member of this site, and after viewing some of the most popular threads (My favourite being: 'Leeds lost pubs') I eventually clicked through to the Leeds Historical Expedition Society' on Flickr.com.

I was stunned, and it really is worth looking through these pictures first hand.



*Figure 2 – Town Hall, Leeds (Credit: Davidson, P.).*

Phill is an urban explorer. Intrepidly going where most dare not, Phill and the society set off into the unknown, armed with nothing more than a camera and a torch. This element of mystery – even danger – is part of what makes the expeditions so exciting. To us, they can be anything from ordinary blokes to a mad secret society of gentlemen – top hats and tails included. Phill assures me however that it isn't all glamour and excitement. A lot of planning and research goes into every exploration and everyone in the group must pull together and work as a team to ensure a successful trip.



*Figure 3 – Wakefield ABC cinema after 11 years closed (Credit: Davidson, P.).*

What sets the society apart from other historical societies is their ability to present the past in such an accessible way. It becomes immediately obvious that these guys know their stuff, and each photograph on their Flickr account is accompanied by a description of what is shown and how it fits in with local and wider history. They strike a fine balance between a history lesson and a madcap adventure into the unknown.

Many of the locations they photograph were involved in the daily lives of previous generations that are within living memory. For one reason or another, they have fallen into disuse and then disrepair. Many beautiful buildings are left to ruin, whether by developers who need the land or simply by accident. As part of the inevitable evolution of a city, large sections of its cultural and historical past stand idle, waiting with baited breath for judgement to be passed on their future. The significance of these buildings exists only in the memory of an aging generation.



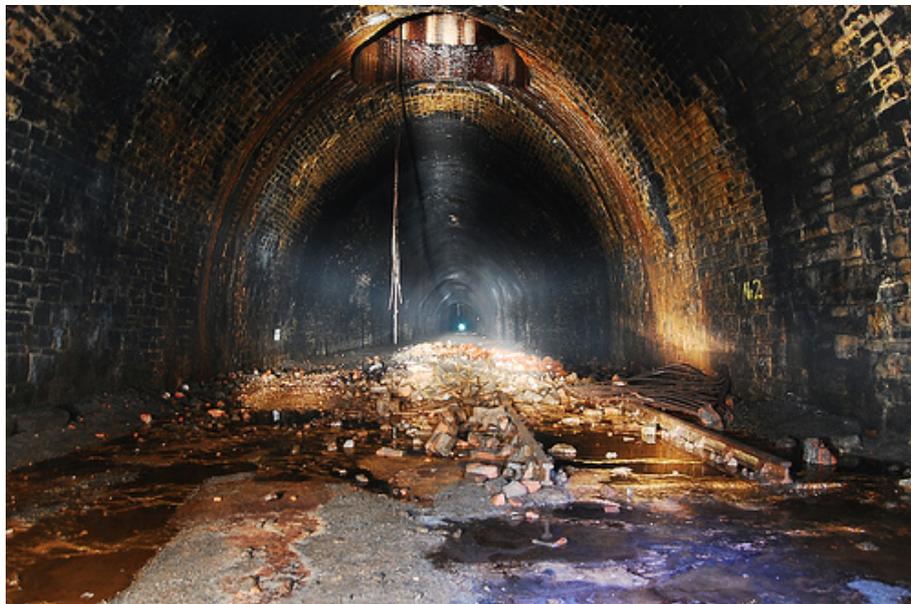
*Figure 4 – Harphurhey Swimming Baths, Manchester (Credit: Davidson, P.).*

There are places most people will never usually see. In many cities, labyrinthine tunnels creep beneath the surface, unseen and unknown to the thousands who walk above them daily. These tunnels once offered protection for the city's residents during periods of conflict or made up parts of a short-lived subway system. It is these underground tunnel systems that often make for the more spectacular adventures.



*Left to right. Figure 5 – Spectacular image of water pouring down an old ventilation shaft in a disused mine. Figure 6 – Underground tunnel at Roundhay Park, Leeds (Credit: Davidson, P.).*

The underground photos take a lot of practice. To photograph an entire railway tunnel 2 miles in length from end to end isn't very easy. They are pitch black places, and vast. To take a photo in these conditions, the society use a technique called 'painting with light'. This involves using a long exposure, a slow picture is taken over 20-30 seconds. A high powered search light is then used to 'paint' the tunnel. This creates an evenly lit picture, from what in reality is just a very large, very dark hole.



*Figure 7 – Queensbury Tunnel, nr. Bradford (Credit: Davidson, P.).*

It is clear to me that the Leeds Historical Expedition Society are opening the eyes of the general public to the history that surrounds them. It is a refreshing and welcome thing to see people spurred into nostalgic conversation, or to see for the first time areas of a city I have lived in my entire life. The past is important,

and too often forgotten in an urban environment. Thankfully, Phill and his society are not alone. In a world where very little remains undiscovered, urban exploration presents the opportunity for an accessible and exciting adventure on what I think is the true ‘final frontier’ of exploration. Across England and the rest of the world, urban explorers are peering through half-closed windows, unlocking forgotten doors and satiating the desire that we all feel to explore the unknown.

Phill can be contacted via [phill\\_dvsn@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:phill_dvsn@yahoo.co.uk) ([mailto:phill\\_dvsn@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:phill_dvsn@yahoo.co.uk)) You can find photos (<http://tinyurl.com/yheu87v>) and videos (<http://tinyurl.com/ygu7mlb>) online.

#### Other sites of interest:

- <http://www.secretleeds.com>
- <http://tinyurl.com/yepge8u>
- <http://www.infiltration.org> (for a more stateside perspective)

*Images reproduced by kind permission of Phillip Davidson*

## 5 The Orkney Islands

**Cath Poucher** (<mailto:cdp501@york.ac.uk>)

The Orkney Imagination is haunted by time (George Mackay Brown cited Foster 2006, 57)

When you think of Orkney, you see images of an isolated community cut off from civilisation. The fact that Orkney is closer to Norway rather than London only verifies this for most people – I know this was the case for my family, who I have been convincing to take me there for the past few years. When they finally gave in this summer just past, I was excited to say the least. But what lay ahead? What actually were these desolate islands that I had roped my family into visiting for a fortnight? I realised that despite my longing to visit the Orkney Islands as a budding archaeologist, I knew nothing about them. My research and recent visit took me by surprise, changing my opinion and perspective of the islands for the better.

Orkney is actually inhabited by around 20,000 people, who occupy 21 out of approximately 67 islands that divide the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea off the northern tip of Scotland (Wickham-Jones 2007, 1). The ‘mainland’ is now joined by a strip of man-made road to 5 other islands. This strip of land is called the ‘Churchill Barriers’ – a tarmac strip on building blocks simply placed into the sea. To the north of the mainland, there are a number of other islands each with its own character. The smooth, rolling landscape of Orkney is formed mainly of sandstone which has been smoothed by glaciation. This gives the Islands a different atmosphere to Scotland, which is similar to the most southern of the Orkney Islands, Hoy; harsh, rugged with striking scenery. The views in Orkney are certainly still breathtaking, but it’s the atmosphere created by the archaeology surrounding you, and the knowledge of what has taken place on the same spot for thousands of years that takes your breath away. The thought of standing in one of Orkney’s many stone circles while witnessing the Northern Lights is surely enough to leave you blown away.



*Figure 1 – Ring of Brodgar at sunset (Credit: author).*

Any archaeologist will know that the Orkney Islands are rich in archaeology both physically and materially. Humans have been on the islands for 10,000 years, and have dramatically shaped the landscape; wherever you look you see archaeology. The islands were first settled in the Mesolithic around 9,000 years ago (Wickham-Jones 2007, 13). Unfortunately, there is little evidence of this when touring the islands as no stone settlements remain. The only evidence of their existence on Orkney are numerous pieces of worked flint and shaped bone which is referenced to in guide books. Also, what were once lowlands in the Mesolithic are now underwater, which has changed the landscape severely over the past few thousand years. The landscape would have looked completely different; woodland would have featured near grassy open fields. Lagoons, bays and headlands would have been where the sea now is, altogether giving Orkney a contrasting look to the one I witnessed.

The lack of evidence stops there though, as the Neolithic sites in Orkney are numerous; there are over 90 sites, which for a small island is quite spectacular. The reason for this amount of evidence is the materials available to the people of the Neolithic. In Orkney there is more stone than woodland, unlike mainland Britain. This means that the Neolithic people used resources readily available; in their case, stone. This is good for tourists and archaeologists today as we can get a good idea of life in Neolithic Orkney. There are countless sites that you will encounter when visiting the islands, the 'Ring of Brodgar' being one already mentioned (Figure 1). The Ring of Brodgar is without doubt a mysterious monument, which was constructed approximately 4,500 years ago (Foster 2006, 34). The function of the henge is one much debated. There was obviously a ceremonial function, but was this just it? Did it extend to ritual or sacrifice, as some would have us believe? The location of the Ring of Brodgar is also special

– it is sandwiched between two lochs, and is a world heritage site due to the amount of Neolithic sites in such close proximity:

- The Ring of Brookanl
- Brookan
- Ring of Brodgar (Figure 1)
- Ness of Brodgar
- Numerous amounts of standing stones
- Stones of Stenness

These are all within 2 miles of each other. This is obviously a significant site, and when there you automatically sense this. When visited at sunset the archaeology, in my opinion, looks its best (Figure 1). The dimming sunlight casts shadows on the earthworks, and also makes the stones more impressive due to the dusky glow of the evening.



*Figure 2 – The Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae (Credit: author).*

I was also taken aback by the condition of the remaining settlements of Neolithic Orkney. The infamous ‘Skara Brae’ (Figure 2) did not disappoint. The facilities and layout were equally fantastic for teaching and engaging the public. The museum explained about the site and the details of the discovery, and held artefacts found at the excavations. It paints a picture of Skara Brae’s ‘market place’, industrial activities, and even talks about the leisure activities in the village (Clarke and Maguire 2007, 17 – 22). The site and museum explain more about Skara Brae than the archaeological text books seem to. It is clear

when arriving at the site how much the landscape has changed; the bay was once fertile land for growing crops and grazing animals. This changed my view from people struggling to survive to an image of a civilized, complex society, who grew crops and lived in very close proximity to each-other for a number of years. It showed me that the skills these people had were not basic, and extinguished any doubt of an image of ‘cave dwelling humans who grew corn’ – For once in my life I was truly speechless. The house in figure 2 clearly shows two beds at either side of the house, a hearth in the centre, and a dresser/sideboards to store and display objects. This was a house organised in a way which didn’t change for thousands of years. This is apparent when looking at Iron Age Brochs, which are laid out in exactly the same way, but are slightly more advanced due to the use of metal.

The evidence of Iron Age occupation in Orkney is equally impressive; Brochs are scattered around the landscape. These Brochs were substantial occupational structures. The walls were hollow and roofed with timber (Wickham-Jones 2007, 82). The most visited of these on the mainland is the “Broch of Gurness”. This example has a Broch with a surrounding village, complete with a main street leading from the village entrance to the Broch entrance, the village and houses ironically look similar to that of Skara Brae, despite being thousands of years apart. The community at Brochs such as Gurness were undoubtedly farmers, with cattle, sheep and pigs. The Iron Age community still hunted and fished though. After visiting the Broch of Gurness, it was obvious that the community was grouped into levels of society, with the ‘highest’ in the Broch, slowly moving out towards the edge of the village. What else was obvious when visiting, and then verified by Wickham-Jones (2007), is that the Iron Age settlers were involved in major warfare (2007, 85). This is evident due to the ditches and ramparts surrounding the settlement – it is obviously defensive rather than for show or decoration. The industry of the Iron Age is also apparent. The site of Mine Howe is a fantastic example of industrial activity. It is essentially a network of underground chambers dug into a large mound. The access is via a steep ladder, which goes down to the numerous chambers, branching out at right angles. Unlike sites in England, which would forbid entry to the mine, you are allowed to go inside. This does however, involve you dressing in a rather unattractive hard hat. It is well worth the money, looking a fool, and the steep climb, as the craftsmanship displayed in Mine Howe is amazing.

The other period of Orkney’s history that jumps out at you is the Norse influence – It can be seen everywhere. The Norse arrived on the Islands and certainly left their mark. As with all places the Norse settled, or ‘invaded’, there are always suggestions of the infamous ‘Viking raids’. While there is certainly evidence in Lindisfarne, Northumbria, according to Wickham Jones (2007, 111) the culprits of this could potentially be the northern isles of Britain,



*Figure 3 – Broch of Gurness, view of the main street with houses either side and the entrance to the Broch (Credit: author).*

i.e. Orkney. But does this suggest a friendly relationship between the Norse invaders and the already settled Picts? This is a subject that has been long debated in archaeology. The evidence suggests a peaceful existence (Wickham-Jones 2007, 112). This is probably a generalisation, and the truth is most likely a combination of peace and warfare. As for the evidence of the Vikings in Orkney, the most striking is at Maeshowe. You may question this, considering that this is a Neolithic site. You may also be asking me why this site was not mentioned while I was talking about the Neolithic period in Orkney. Well, the answer to this is simple, and can be explained by the image that I took away with me of Maeshowe. The Neolithic tomb of Maeshowe is located within a mile of the world heritage site where all the Neolithic sites mentioned earlier in this article are. The entrance to the tomb is aligned so that in midwinter, three weeks after the shortest day, the sun beams into the chamber, illuminating it with a spectacular glow. I however, was not fortunate enough to witness this, but instead went at sunset, on one of the guided tours. The first thing that struck me when I got to Maeshowe was the entrance, which was approximately 2 ft tall. The stone making the left wall was indeed a work of genius and incredible craftsmanship: incredibly it was one single stone. Inside the main chamber the walls were flag stones. There were side cells inside the main chamber and there were two upright standing stones directly in front of me, which bore striking resemblance to the henge, the Stones of Stenness. This was indeed a credit to Neolithic building technology. Even though this was a burial chamber, it was not what I noticed. While admiring the building work, I noticed runes on the wall. As part of the guided tour, we then heard of how the Norsemen broke into the mound in the 12th century. The runes in Maeshowe are the largest collection outside Scandinavia (Foster 2006, 20). The carvings are by the cook of Earl Rognvald. She tells of how they all travelled to Rome in 1153 after going on many adventures (Foster 2006, 20). There are many other doodles done by the Norsemen, including a competition above the doorway of who could write in the highest place; 'Eyjolf Kolbeinsson carved these runes high' (Foster 2006, 22).

This to me is why Maeshowe encompasses the classic image of Orkney. The thought of Norsemen taking refuge in a Neolithic burial mound, and leaving their mark for us to see on guided tours only adds to the intrigue of this Island. This sort of evidence would not be available in England, nor would it be so easy to look at in real life. This is what makes Orkney such a magical place it is willing to give you a tantalising glimpse of its secrets, while keeping just enough locked away for you to speculate about it.

The archaeology does not stop there. There are echoes of the Second World War still visible on the islands. Orkney was a key player in the World wars due to the strategic importance of Scapa Flow, the stretch of water in the Orkney Islands. 100,000 people were sent to Orkney which improved roads, and provided an economic boom for farmers and merchants. It also created sites still visited today. The Italian chapel is actually a metal hut with a corrugated metal roof. The interior and exterior were decorated by Italian prisoners of war, and it is a truly beautiful space. As mentioned earlier in the article, the Churchill barriers link five of the islands to the mainland, and were built to 'create a safe anchorage for the British fleet within Scapa Flow' (Wickham-Jones 2007, 206). While driving over the Barriers, you will notice the remnants of ships sunk in the war. These have been left around the barriers and appear clearly out of

the water, almost as a ship graveyard. It is sobering reminder of the war effort, and serves as part of a stunning view against the backdrop of the breathtaking Orkney landscape.



*Figure 4 – showing the view from the Churchill Barriers of Scapa flow (Credit: author).*

The Orkney Islands exceeded my families and my own expectations. The archaeology of this place changes your perspective on how the ancient people lived. These people were not simply surviving, but flourishing. The evidence at Skara Brae suggests a forward thinking community who led a fulfilling life. This is again suggested in the Iron Age site at the Broch of Gurness. The ceremonial sites are certainly more spectacular in the evening, and they are very well managed and very informative. Orkney is a fantastic place for a summer holiday as well as going there on digs. It is a relaxing place with a laid back way of life which affects you while you are there. I know I will certainly be returning for another instalment, and I advise any budding archaeologist to do the same.

## **Bibliography**

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