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Fragments of death. A taphonomic study of human remains from Neolithic Orkney

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of tremendous variation in the treatment of the dead, both temporally and geographically, has done little to curtail the pursuit of homogenous mortuary rites for monuments which appear, by virtue of their architecture, to be similar. This is aptly demonstrated in considering the Neolithic tombs of Orkney, Scotland. The Orcadian human bone assemblages represent the largest volume for this time period from Britain – a significant resource. However, discrete skeletons are lacking, the researcher being presented with formidable volumes of disarticulated and commingled remains. Themes of transformation, fragmentation and manipulation of the body permeate the literature, conferring significance on the tombs as places of transition. Previously, the inherent complexity of the remains has made them an unattractive proposition for detailed study. New interpretations are derived from examination of excavation reports, rather than the material itself. However, advances in taphonomic analysis means techniques now exist for approaching such complex assemblages. A study has now been successfully carried out on the Orcadian remains, uncovering a wealth of new data. This data draws attention to subtle variations in practice between and within tombs, and advocates for a dramatic reconsideration of the current understanding of the practices and cosmologies associated with these enigmatic structures.

1. Introduction

Transformation and transition; these two words encapsulate interpretations of the megalithic tombs of Neolithic Britain and Ireland. They indicate purpose, describing the function of the architecture and the underpinning ideology of the associated mortuary practices. But how has such an understanding been achieved?

Much of the argument extends from the condition in which human remains, when present, are discovered within the tombs. Generally speaking, such assemblages are characterised by disarticulation, disorder and fragmentation. Challenges to interpretation and analysis are further compounded by the small numbers of complete bones, with minimum numbers of individuals frequently reported in single figures. Hence, the most logical explanations for the lack of fully articulated skeletons focus upon decomposition of soft tissues and the progressive disarticulation of skeletons (initially deposited as articulated corpses). Evidence in support of excarnation and cremation has also been identified (McKinley, 2008; Smith and Brickley, 2004). The commonality in all of these identified practices is in their underlying principles of transformation (Smith, 2006, 683; Thomas, 2000). The mobility of human remains, coupled with their disarticulated state within the megaliths, has led to the development of hypothetical models of curation and circulation of bone within and between tombs (e.g. Richards, 1988; Sharples, 1985; Thomas, 2000). This paper goes beyond earlier and poorly supported theories of transformation, employing a rigorous and detailed taphonomic study of Neolithic remains from Orkney to provide evidence for an alternative and more comprehensive theoretical model.

2. Background

The archipelago of the Orkney Islands, located at 59°N in the North Atlantic Ocean, is best known for the quantity and quality of Neolithic chambered tombs. The architecture of these structures has been extensively studied, and they are categorised into an early type (Orkney-Cromarty) and a later type (Maeshowe) (Davidson and Henshall, 1989). However, relatively few have yielded human bones and, for those that have, assemblages typically represent small numbers of individuals which are, in turn, characterised by disarticulation and fragmentation. The Orcadian megalithic tombs are part of a much larger distribution of similar structures found across Britain, Ireland and the rest of Europe. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that monuments with comparable architecture and material remains should generate similar interpretations and debates. Echoing what has been outlined for the megalithic tombs in the rest of Britain and Ireland, the specific mortuary treatments associated with the Orcadian structures range from direct inhumation (Barber, 1997, 69; Reilly, 2003, 145; Renfrew, 1979, 59–60) to secondary burial and excarnation (Chesterman 1979, 106; 1983, 124; Richards, 1988, 49).

However, closer scrutiny reveals many interpretations of funerary practice in Orkney have depended solely on re-visiting original excavation reports (although see Barber, 1997; Lawrence, 2006, 2012), rather than an examination of the physical remains. The complex nature of

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the material itself most readily explains this situation (Wysocki and Whittle, 2000, 591). However, as knowledge of taphonomic processes has improved, this apparent oversight now provides the opportunity to explore an untapped resource. In light of the excellent excavation and recording, in tandem with the sheer number of remains, the chambered tomb of Quanterness, Mainland, presented an excellent assemblage for just this type of approach. Indeed, it is this key characteristic of fragmentation and perceived disarray that now makes this osseous material of particular interest. If the agents of fragmentation can be identified, there is potential to greatly enhance understandings of the mechanisms that transformed bodies from representing individual beings, to their incorporation within a corporate mass. The fundamental question is whether this transformation is due to the natural ravages of time, or a more deliberate, anthropogenic construct?

3. Quanterness, Quoyness and mortuary practices

The Maeshowe type tomb of Quanterness (HY 417129) was excavated by Colin Renfrew from 1972 to 1974, revealing one of the best preserved of the Orcadian tombs (Renfrew, 1979) with four of its six side cells accessible and unblocked by rubble (1979, 48) (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). The excavation involved a little over 80% of the main chamber

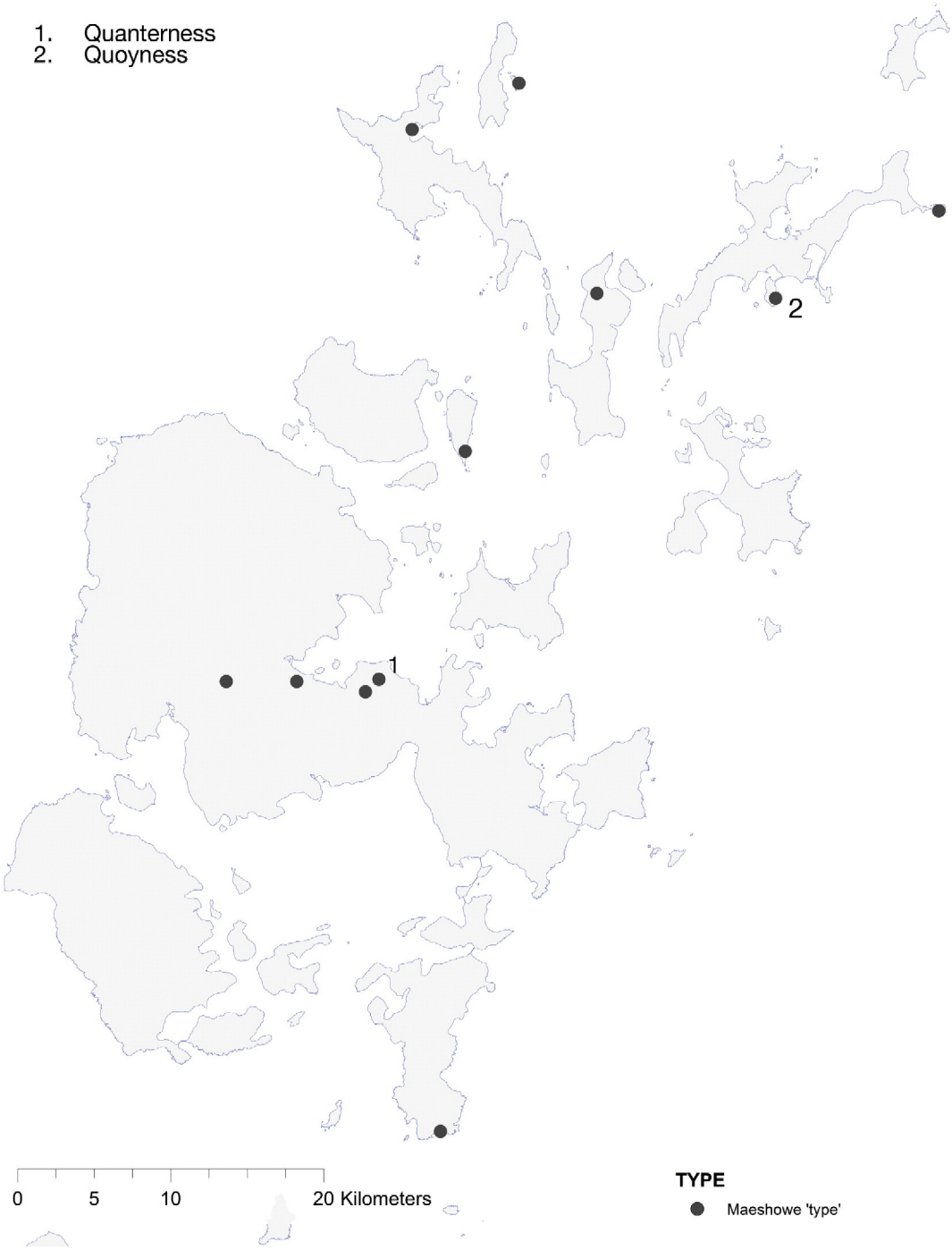

Fig. 1. Location map of Quanterness and Quoyness * Land-Form PANORAMA® data is reproduced here by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. Contains OS data © Crown Copyright (and database right) 2016. † Scheduled monument data is reproduced here under the terms laid out in the 'One Scotland Mapping Agreement: Schedule 5 - End User Licence' © Copyright Historic Scotland 2012. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 2012.

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