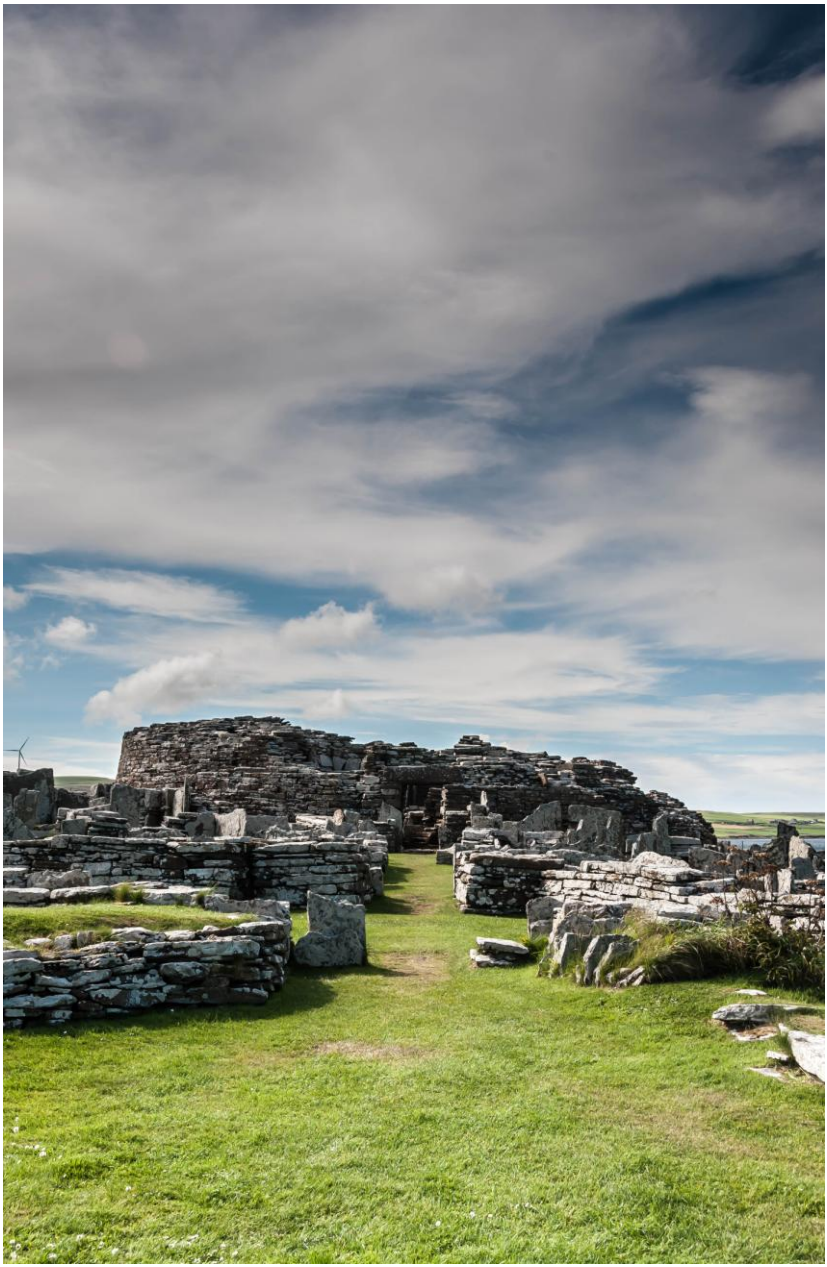

The monumental entrance to the Broch of Gurness

The Iron Age

In Orkney, the thousand years or so between about 500 BCE and about 500 CE are known as the Iron Age – in southern Britain the Iron Age ends around 2000 years ago when the Romans invade, first with their material culture and then with their legions. The Iron Age is associated with the adoption of iron working – at the lower temperatures required for smelting and forging, rather than by casting. Archaeologists tend to describe Iron Age Orkney as being populated by 'Iron Age people'. This rather obvious but neutral term is used in order to avoid using labels such as 'Celts' or 'Picts' which are deemed to be unspecific, and even politically loaded, but which tend to be commonly applied to these people in this period.

As stated, these Iron Age people of Orkney were probably descended from at least some of the previous Bronze Age people, and from at least some of the Neolithic people before them – archaeologists are constantly questioning the stability and longevity of populations in general, especially those of 'the mass of common' people, although history tells us that 'elites' are often replaced.

Please forgive my initial concerns to get my terminology 'politically correct' because I would now like to suggest that it is quite likely, given the material culture left behind by these Iron Age people, that they were Picts – or at least proto-Picts – although it is not known what name, if any, they applied to themselves. 'Pict' is a term of Latin origin, it means 'painted people' and may have been a derogatory label, referring to tattoos or body paint – similarly to 'barbarian' which is an onomatopoeic term meaning: 'people who say: ba ba', or, more colloquially: 'people who don't speak like we do'.

This use of a Latin term illustrates one of the interesting things about this period of time: this is the era of proto-history – the people and islands of Orkney were not writing their own histories, at least not any that we know of, but they were being written about, albeit minimally, usually by classical geographers and historians.

The existence of these islands was almost certainly known by the Romans. The inscription on the Arch of Claudius' is held at the Capitoline Museums and states that Claudius 'received the surrender of eleven kings of the Britons defeated without any loss' when he invaded Kent in 43 CE. Orosius, writing in the fifth-century CE, states that one of these kings included the 'King of the Orcades'. Eutropius, writing in the fourth-century CE, states: 'Certain islands also, called the Orcades, situated in the ocean, beyond Britain, he (i.e. Claudius) added to the Roman empire, and gave his son the name of Britannicus.' Tacitus records that Agricola sailed his fleet around Britannica and conquered the islands of the Orcades about 80 CE. These are the few, fleeting and casual references that are available. However, it is possible that some of this is Roman 'spin', the Orcades being mentioned only to show that the Roman invasion of Britannica was thorough and complete, even to the very north of the known world, but in reality lacking any substance[1].

The archaeological record in Orkney hints that Roman influence was limited to trade and did not extend into conquest or occupation. That trade, if it existed, was minimal, with only a few sherds of Roman Samian ware being found at the Broch of Midhowe, an amphora at the Broch of Gurness[2], and a carnelian inset from a ring at Howe, just outside of Stromness.

Reverting to archaeology for hints about the nature of Iron Age beliefs, it would seem that, whereas the Neolithic 'religion' appears focused on the sky, in particular on the sun, and little is known of Bronze Age religious belief, Iron Age beliefs seem to be concerned more with a watery underworld. A theme of Iron Age beliefs in the British Isles is that (some of) the gods are underground and to commune with them, we need to join them in their chthonic realm.

The extraction of iron ore from the ground, and the forging of it into useful objects, may thus have been viewed as a magical process and an activity which was imbued with spiritual significance. Certainly the number of blacksmith deities and associated mythology around the world would endorse this. A further corroboration of a belief in a powerful underworld may be the finds: in Iron Age Britain many high status metal objects seem to have been deliberately deposited in peat bogs and bodies of water, possibly originally intended as offerings to these watery-earthy supernatural powers.

Just as the Bronze Age people, and the Neolithic people before them, built their monuments in places that may have been important to their predecessors, the Iron Age people also inhabited a landscape that was already bustling with an ancient presence. At some sites the Iron Age people seem to deliberately locate their monuments in places that resonate with earlier structures. There seems to have been a sense, for these people, of an awareness of a time before their time. It is also entirely possible that they had constructed a mythology to 'explain' the presence of these pre-existing landscape features[3].

Etymology of Orkney

Since this is the period of proto-history, this seems an appropriate point to discuss where the name 'Orkney' may derive from.

The earliest known historical reference to Orkney was written by Pytheas of Massilia. He visited the British Isles probably in the early fourth or late third-century BCE. He described Britain as being triangular in shape with a northern tip called 'Orcas', which may be a reference to Dunnet Head in Caithness, rather than these islands. Pytheas' writings are lost, they did not survive, but they are referred to by other writers, such as Dioderus Siculus in the first-century BCE, whose writings have survived.

The second-century CE Greek geographer, Ptolemy, produced a map of the British Isles which included a depiction of the islands of 'Orcades' off the north coast of Scotland. Most of the place-names given for the far north of Britain are restricted to the coast,

suggesting that the mapping was done from ship, and possibly only from ship, and implies that it wasn't safe for them to come ashore or to venture too far inland. As these place-names mainly refer to animals, they may be referring to tribal names rather than geographical place-names[4].

Pomponius Mela, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus, each referred to the 'Orcades' islands in the first-century CE. Then Bede refers to 'Orcades insulae' in his 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People', written about 700 years later.

Etymologists usually interpret 'orc' as a Pictish word meaning 'young pig', believing that it refers to a Pictish tribal name – many of which according to Ptolemy's map, as stated above, may have included a form of anthropomorphic identity with a particular animal. Norse colonists in the late ninth-century reinterpreted 'orc' as 'orkn' meaning 'seal'. They named Orkney: Orkneyjar, or 'seal islands', and the largest island as 'Megenland' (Mainland) or 'Hrossey' (Horse Island) – which, if there was a tribal identification with totemic animals, may have derived from older links with the horse bones found within Maeshowe by Farrer.

However, Pytheas' reference to Orkney remains the earliest. As a Greek, his intention may have been to allude to the demon Horkos, from whom the Roman god Orcus may have been transliterated. Orcus was the Roman god of the dead, responsible for punishing evildoers in the afterlife, but Orcus also referred to the land of the dead. Perhaps those Classicists were actually making insinuations about the extreme north of Orkney and the winter darkness of these islands?[5]

Another note on Druids

As stated previously, we know little about the Druids other than what can be gleamed from some of the Classical Historians, such as Tacitus and Julius Caesar, but, if Druids did exist, then the Iron Age is the period that is synonymous with them. The British Isles have conceded some archaeological material, dated to the Iron Age, which has been suggested as being evidence of Druidic practices, but the material is contentious and subject to many different interpretations. Much of the written material which is today commonly referred to as Druidic derives from either the Druidic revival of recent centuries or from the modern 'reinvention' of Druidism – neither of which may necessarily have much in common with the 'original Druidism', if such a thing ever existed.

The Classical historians tell us even less about ritual practices in Iron Age Orkney than they do about the geography; this adds to the suggestion that they either didn't disembark from their ships or didn't venture far inland. Whilst Julius Caesar describes Druidic beliefs in some detail, albeit in a heavily prejudicial manner, his observations apply to Gaul and southern Britain, not to Orkney.

Whether or not there were Druids in Orkney during the Iron Age is largely a matter of conjecture and, even if there were, it would be difficult to know what might be

considered acceptable evidence for their existence. Archaeologists haven't found much evidence for religious specialists or a priesthood in Orkney at this time, although religious ceremonies usually require a trained person to lead them, or at least to facilitate them, so a priesthood could be inferred.

One tentative conclusion we might be able to make, however, is that, if there were Druids in Orkney during the Iron Age, they may have had to perform ritual in places other than their allegedly preferred groves of trees.

Mine Howe

One of the most intriguing sites in Orkney is Mine Howe (HY 513 059), explored fully in 1999 and excavated extensively, including being the subject of a Time Team[6] special. Mine Howe appears in the landscape as a hillock, but it is not a natural feature. On investigation, twenty nine stone steps were revealed which, half-way down, pause at a rock half-landing. At this half-landing, two long side chambers open out, one above the other, and the stone steps then continue down, almost as far as the main rounded chamber, which is just over 1 m wide and 4 m high. The roof of this chamber is corbelled and the walls are constructed using dry-stone walling techniques. The steps end about a meter above the floor of this chamber, so this last stage required a jump to access fully.

Although no longer open to the public, I had the opportunity of visiting in 2007 whilst on holiday. A little lighting had been put in, along with a rope hand-rail, but care was still needed because those mysterious twenty nine steps were slippery, wet and treacherous. The descent at Mine Howe was quite disorientating and the bottom chamber really only allowed space for a couple of people at once.

The acoustics in this site were interesting – we tried clapping and chanting – and male baritones had a particularly evocative effect. Mine Howe may have been a place for retreating into the earth and being fully incumbent, but the atmosphere was eerie and Otherworldly and this is one site where I definitely felt that I was an intruder.

Brochs

Brochs are circular stone towers, windowless, usually constructed with double-skinned dry-stone walls. The tallest still standing is at Mousa in Shetland, to 13 m, but most are reduced to standing to just a few metres in height at the maximum now. Archaeologists don't know if they were roofed, or partially roofed, or fully open. They look a little like a stone fez (Egyptian hat).

In many ways, brochs are to Scotland what hillforts are to England and Wales – usually interpreted as defensive structures, they were probably more about a display of impregnability and status than of being much practical use in warfare. It is likely that in

Iron Age societies secular power was closely associated with religious power (as anthropologists observe for tribal societies in general) and archaeologists are increasingly concluding that the function of prehistoric sites cannot be neatly labelled as exclusively domestic versus exclusively ritualistic, but rather that there was an overlap, or multiplicity, of use. Hillforts, for example, are just as likely to be interpreted these days as ritual centres, as much as defensive ones[7], and it is possible to make similar deductions about brochs. Hillforts, in particular, seem to be about the safe communal storage of grain seed in underground pits – the food of the future being literally placed into the care of chthonic entities[8].

Brochs occur all over northern Scotland, the Western and Northern Isles. They are usually positioned on the coast, the exception being in Orkney where they also occur inland. Orkney is home to about a quarter of all known broch sites and the island of Burray has so many that its Old Norse name translates as 'Broch Island'. Brochs in Orkney are unique in sometimes having villages or clusters of houses around them.

There are so many brochs in Orkney, often so close to each other, that their defensive function has been questioned. They are also fairly uniform in build, suggesting that they were the product of itinerant specialist masons, pandering to the tastes of local aristocrats. Rather than being defensive, it is possible that brochs are evidence for Iron Age posturing; the equivalent of a nuclear deterrent, they were designed to signal that these people were so well defended, that there was no point in attacking. There is no evidence for warfare on a large scale in Orkney during this period, rather these are likely to have been minor kings, queens, and chiefs, engaged in petty skirmishes, cattle raids and counter-raids.

Broch of Gurness

This is one of the best preserved brochs in Orkney. However, care needs to be taken when interpreting some of the features because the site was excavated in the 1930s when methods were different from today and archaeologists had a tendency to be more 'confident' when reconstructing and interpreting features.

Apart from the broch tower, on arrival at the site the most visible features are the outer defences. These are now covered in grass but were originally comprised of three stone-lined ditches cut into the rock. It is possible that some of these remains have been destroyed by the sea. It is thoroughly recommended that the visitor walks straight to the far end of the site, either around the outer circular defences or by using the modern stone steps built into the defences along the cliff edge, in order to approach the broch tower from the original entrance. This way you will get an idea of how formidable and monumental the fortifications were and be able to appreciate the magnificent entrance which forms a 'processional way' into the complex.

Any visitor approaching from the sea would have been in awe of this site – it is quite overwhelming how heavily defended it is. It could possibly even be argued that it is

overly defended, or that it deterred those Roman ships more successfully than the Classical historians wished to admit.

Each of the houses nestling between the broch tower and the outer defences had a fairly uniform layout. They were carefully planned with many of their entrances opening onto the 'central street' which leads straight from the village entrance to the broch tower doorway. Some of the houses even have horizontal flag-stones at their thresholds, perhaps once acting as a form of stone doormat. Each house had a living area with smaller partitions created with upright flagstones. Hearths are visible, plus water tanks set into the ground, recessed shelves and cubby holes, cupboards, and rotary quern stones. The houses are similar to those at Skara Brae but this may simply be because there is only so much that can be built using flat slabs of stone rather than being any evidence for a continuity of architectural style. Look carefully at each of the house entrances, on the ground where the doors used to be, because some of the stone pivot holes still survive.

Just inside the broch tower can be seen the holes where the bar to shut the main gate was slotted. Inside the broch tower there is a complicated arrangement of partitioning of space around at least two hearths, plus drains and water tanks. Directly opposite the entrance, set into the double-skinned wall of the broch tower, are stone steps leading up. To the left of the entrance, to the south, between the entrance and these steps, is a doorway above ground level, indicating that there were originally internal levels and galleries above floor height. Stones jutting out on the inside of the walls may have once acted as support for these wooden galleries. It is possible that the ground floor was a place for cooking, keeping livestock, metal-working – all the noisy, dirty, industrial functions – whilst the upper levels were reserved for sleeping and relaxing.

On the floor, near to the entrance and covered by modern metal mesh, is an underground 'cistern' which is usually interpreted as a well. It is no longer possible to descend into this chamber but it is just about feasible to peer down, through the mesh, let your eyes adjust, and see about a dozen neat, but narrow, enigmatic stone steps leading down into the darkness. I have been informed that there are also tunnels underneath, leading off in different directions.

In my opinion, this underground chamber with stone steps seems an inordinate amount of effort for a well and this structure is most reminiscent of Mine Howe – which no one seems to have any problem interpreting as a ritual site. Gurness is not the only broch site with an internal 'well' and, whilst these features could indeed be wells, I doubt that was all they functioned as because the amount of water they would have been able to supply would be insufficient to meet the needs of the likely numbers in the broch community plus their livestock. This traditional interpretation may need to be re-evaluated.

To access any of these underground chambers involves increasingly entering into more private and enclosed space, first through the outer 'village', then into the broch tower, then down into the chamber via the carefully carved steps. Certainly this could be a

veneration of water – perhaps a precursor to holy wells – but I think it is the descent into the underground which is as important.

Broch towers are traditionally interpreted as a reflection of an increasingly hierarchical society. In this explanatory model, the elite family would have resided in the tower itself, with their 'minions and retainers' living in the houses in the village immediately around. Those excluded from the community membership would have been kept outside and at a distance by the defences. An alternative interpretation is that the broch tower was a communal space, jointly shared and used by the entire community of the site, perhaps at times when a refuge was needed or communal ceremonies were enacted. Perhaps, if the underground chamber was where the 'gods' for each individual broch community were accessed, then this would have been the source of power for each extended family group. In this scenario, the underground chambers become a localised focus for supernatural energy. As such, they would have been spaces which needed to be protected and conserved in order to ensure that contact with the chthonic entities was reserved for the exclusive use of the hosting community. If so, this provides a possible explanation for why they were covered by a broch tower.

There are about half a dozen broch towers along this part of the coast. Several of them are visible, surviving as low mounds covered in grass. There are another half a dozen towers across Eynhallow Sound on the island of Rousay, on the facing coastline. Clearly, this stretch of water was important enough to these people that they found it necessary to monitor it carefully a couple of thousand years ago.

Broch of Midhowe

Visible from the Broch of Gurness, the Broch of Midhowe lies across the waters of Eynhallow Sound on the island of Rousay, and also has a cistern to the north of the interior of the broch, which is usually interpreted as a 'cellar' with a well.

As at the Broch of Gurness, the cistern is not accessible and is covered by a metal mesh. However, records show that this structure comprises an underground 'room' cut into the bedrock and roofed with flag-stones at a sufficient height for an adult to crouch in. There would have been room for only a couple of people. Access is via a vertical rock-hewn 'chimney' type tunnel (similar to how some earth-houses are accessed, including Grain and Rennibister), which would have required a final bodily twist to access the main chamber[9]. There are a few narrow and shallow 'steps' cut into the vertical tunnel. The floor of the chamber consists of bedrock and includes a triangular fissure, possibly natural in shape, which is recorded as still collecting and holding water. In the walls are a few rectangular holes which would seem designed to hold deposits, and are similar to the holes in the walls at Skara Brae.

Originally, when the broch tower was standing and covered, and perhaps when there were many more structures standing, the inside of this underground room would probably have been void of any natural light.

As at Gurness, as well as the earth-houses at Grain and Rennibister, and Minehowe, it would appear that it is the descent into the underground, the 'underworld', which seems important here. The purpose of the broch tower may be to defend and restrict access to this portal to this chthonic realm.

This broch is constructed in a naturally defensive location on a rocky promontory with geos to either side; these have been supplemented with ditches and a stone wall to provide defences on the landward side. The construction and appearance has similarities to the broch at Gurness.

The houses around the base of this broch tower are not quite as substantial as those around Gurness, but one of the structures has been interpreted as a blacksmith's forge because of the evidence for metal-working.

Rousay generally does not attract as many visitors, so even at the height of summer it is possible to have this site to oneself for a considerable amount of time; time enough to connect to the site in solitude.

Broch of Borwick

This site is set in a stunning location, right on the edge of a cliff. It was repaired and reconstructed at the end of the twentieth-century. It is worth visiting for its location, which is magnificence. Take care, the cliffs here are precarious. Several visitors have reported hearing the faint sound of voices or music, and a sense of feeling that they are being gently touched.

The Cairns[10]

At the Cairns on the island of South Ronaldsay, overlooking the Bay of Windwick, archaeologists are excavating an Iron Age settlement site which includes a broch structure, inside which has been found an underground chamber, also referred to as a 'well'. The corbelled chamber was accessed via seven stones steps, and was about 2 m in height. The architecture, in the form of internal partitions of orthostats, was apparently designed in such a way that anyone accessing the upper building would have been steered to move around it in a clockwise direction (the same direction as the sun), but in an anti-clockwise direction once they climbed down into the underground chamber. The archaeologists have suggested that a sunwise direction may symbolise life, whilst an anti-sunwise direction may symbolise death or the afterlife.

During 2018's summer excavation season, a wooden bowl was recovered from the water-logged conditions inside the 'well', providing exceptional levels of preservation. About 30 cm in diameter, it had been made from an alder log and subjected to several repairs using metal rivets, suggesting that attempts had been made in prehistory to prolong the useful life of the vessel. Alder is particularly interesting when it is cut in

spring from trees growing in waterlogged conditions because the wood will appear to 'bleed'[11].

Strands of human hair, cut from more than one individual, were found in association with the bowl. Ethnographical analyses suggest that this might indicate the performance of rites of passage or magical acts. Other organic remains recovered include plant material, insects, and preserved faecal material. The archaeologists have suggested that this evidence may indicate that this seemingly curated bowl, water, and chamber were a place where libations or sacred ablutions were performed. The modern investigations at this site may necessitate a re-evaluation of Iron Age subterranean structures in general; a much needed re-evaluation, in my opinion.

St Michael's Church

Although the current church building dates from the 1830s, the distinctive war memorial in the cemetery sits on top of what is likely to be a broch site. Very little of the broch itself is still visible but this mound provides a prominent visual landmark over West Mainland. This site is located upon a natural hill which rises 47 m above sea level, set in a vicinity that is otherwise fairly flat; the broch mound and war memorial enhance the hill further. Calculations on a map show that, whilst this location is not the exact physical centre of West Mainland, it is near enough the physical centre, and thus this location may have functioned as an omphalos in the Iron Age. The concept of the omphalos – a symbolic centre that is identified and located in a physical place – tends to be connected with symbolic mythologised landscapes in which the local topography is believed to be linked with the 'heavens' in some manner. That this naturally central and prominent place was enhanced in the Iron Age with a broch site all suggests that it functioned as an important and sacred site in prehistory.

This is the only church dedicated to St Michael in Orkney. Churches dedicated to St Michael tend to be built on top of important pre-Christian (i.e. pagan) sites – another famous one is on top of Glastonbury Tor. In Christian mythology, St Michael was (is?) the archangel, possibly the only archangel, who was the General in charge of God's angelic forces. Victorious over Satan's rebellion, Michael is a potent force in Christianity, to be called upon when a lot of power is needed to conquer evil. That this broch site was replaced by a church dedicated to St Michael suggests that it may have a place where older pre-Christian powers were believed to have been vanquished and conquered.

There are some interesting alignments that are viewable from this location – the views from here are fascinating and the mound is visible in the surrounding landscape – admittedly the war memorial helps to locate it today, although a broch tower would have been just as visually prominent in the past. This would have been an ideal place to perform kingship inauguration rituals as the initiate could command views over a large territory. As stated, in these types of tribal society, secular and religious powers are often linked.

Potentially, all of this evidence adds weight to the argument that brochs were ceremonial rather than, or as well as, defensive sites.

Earth-houses

Other underground chambers from the Iron Age period in Orkney include the earth-houses. These are usually interpreted as domestic structures and originally they would have been associated with a stone round-house on the surface from within which it was possible to climb down, at first vertically, then along a long and often curved horizontal underground passage leading to a rounded chamber. Elsewhere in the British Islands, these underground structures are known as souterrains and they are usually interpreted as storage or cellar facilities – it being cooler underground – or areas in which to hide at times of danger, or for ritual use.

Grain (or Grainbank) earth-house

The cover to the entrance of this site is modern and is accessed by a hatchway. The steps down into the passageway have been restored at the top, next to the original access is a vertical 'chimney' which can still be seen to the side. There is a 'C' shaped passage to crawl along which is about 6 m in length, the central trench cut into the passage floor is modern and is intended to make access easier. This passageway leads into a rounded chamber over 3 m long by about 2 m wide. The passage and chamber are constructed with monoliths and orthostats and dry-stone walling – this could be for practical reasons to do with access to available building materials but could also be a monumental reference to Neolithic tombs – note that for the folk who built these earth-houses, the people who built the Neolithic tombs were nearly as far back in their past as the earth-house builders are to our past today.

Once in the chamber, turn off the torch light and experience the darkness fully – this site is like a sensory deprivation chamber.

Rennibister earth-house

Access to this site is via a modern hatchway directly into the central chamber, so it is not possible to experience the darkness like at Grain. This rounded chamber is about 3 m long by over 2 m wide. The chamber originally had a corbelled roof – perhaps another architectural reference to the corbelled roofs at Mine Howe and the Neolithic tombs. There are also recesses and shelves in the walls which are a possible memory of those at Skara Brae and other Neolithic structures. The original 'S' shaped entranceway can be seen and crawled along at your own risk, this is about 3 m in length. When this earth-

house was excavated in the 1920s it was found to contain the skeletons of at least eighteen people, of which twelve were children. This is usually interpreted as a secondary usage of this structure, at the end of its period of use, and an atypical function of earth-houses, but it may not be.

Personal reflection: Going underground

All of these structures have their own atmosphere although they all differ in their accessibility for the spiritual pilgrim. There are, however, some common characteristics which I have attempted to draw out in my descriptions. They are all monumental structures, built with skill and care and utilising construction techniques which possibly have symbolic references to some of the ancestral structures of the Neolithic. Many sites are commonly interpreted in a functional manner without reference to ritual – except for Mine Howe which seems to evade any functional explanation.

I would argue that these underground chambers all had a ritual function in common because they are constructed too well and in too stylised a manner to be purely practical in function. The passageways of the earth-houses in particular prompt the question of why they weren't built in a straight line – straight would be economically sensible – underground passages are not easy to build, but curved means that light can be excluded, and possibly sound too. From the central chambers at all these sites, I would suggest, based on my own observation and personal experiences, that these were places where sensory deprivation could take place and where auditory phenomena could be used to induce an altered state of consciousness. Once in an altered state of consciousness, the gods residing in the ground might be able to be more directly communicated with.

Exercise: Sensory deprivation

For any spiritual pilgrim who can time their visit to these sites to experience them by themselves, it is possible to achieve altered states of consciousness yourself as these are readily trance-inducing places. For those sites where you have company, or which you cannot access fully, place what you can of their memory in your mind's eye and try travelling there in your imagination later.

Approaching St Michael's Church, via the St Magnus Way

[1] Moffat, 2015.

[2] The amphora found at the Broch of Gurness was of a type that would originally have contained alcohol, a high status consumable, but the form of vessel was one which had ceased to be used by the Romans after 60 CE (Moffat, 2015). This may assist in dating but the item may have been an 'exotic' one which was subsequently 'curated' or continued to be used by the broch inhabitants well after this date.

[3] Martin Carruthers is an authority on Iron Age Orkney and this information has been summarised from his public lectures.

[4] Moffat, 2015.

[5] Whitworth, 2017.

[6] Time Team was a long running UK terrestrial television series which was highly influential in popularising archaeology at the end of the twentieth-century / beginning of the twenty-first-century. The premise of each programme was to investigate an archaeological site over a brief, but intensive, time-restricted period – typically three days.

[7] I am grateful to J.D.Hill for sharing these ideas with me.

[8] Refer particularly Cunliffe's (2004) excavations at Danebury hillfort, Hampshire, and Reynold's (1979) experimental archaeology at Butser Ancient Farm.

[9] Entry into these underground chambers, similarly to Neolithic cairns, seems to draw on birthing symbolism: Neolithic cairns seem to be built with part of the passage being deliberately narrower, and there are often 'resisting' energies around this point.

[10] Martin Carruthers is an authority on Iron Age Orkney and the site director of the Cairns excavations, this information has been summarised from his public lectures.

[11] I am grateful to Mark Woodsford-Dean for his insights about alder wood.