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Decorated and dressed stonework is found in a range of built settings in Neolithic Orkney. It forms part of the wider assemblage of so-called megalithic art that is characteristic of the passage grave tradition of the European Neolithic. But in contrast to other regions, in Orkney it is found in stone-built dwellings as well as funerary structures. In this chapter I will be examining the motifs and techniques of execution of the decorated architectural stonework found in the buildings of Neolithic Orkney. I will focus in particular on the assemblage from the Ness of Brodgar, to examine the context in which different forms of decorated stones were worked, and often reworked, and appreciated on the site. I will then explore what this can tell us about the relationship between image and process.

It is pertinent to look at decorated architectural stonework within the wider context of the Making a Mark project. Several hundred examples of Neolithic decoration are now recorded from the Ness of Brodgar, which has produced the largest assemblage of in situ Neolithic decoration outside of the Brugh na Bóinne, Ireland (Th omas 2016). They share many of the motifs found on contemporary Neolithic artefacts, such as Grooved Ware pottery, worked bone and portable stone objects. In common with the decoration found on artefacts, the carvings found in built settings appear to be exclusively non-figurative in nature with a predominance of linear, geometric designs, such as parallel bands, lozenges and chevrons. These commonalities suggest a shared concern with the visual form of motifs applied across a range of media and settings. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the further, and more intriguing, similarities between the carved stonework found in Orcadian buildings and decorated portable artefacts. At the Ness of Brodgar in particular, many decorated architectural stones seem to have had complex lives comprising several stages of working and reworking (cf. Jones et al. 2016). These palimpsests can serve to augment or enhance the primary working and decoration, but the process of successive mark-making also frequently obliterates or hides earlier stone-working. This is a phenomenon which has been noted in the decorated stonework at Knowth,
Brugh na Bóinne, Ireland (Eogan 1997; see also Chapter 10 this volume), where a large number of structural stones exhibit evidence for either the substitution or replacement of motifs with later working, or the incorporation of earlier motifs into new compositions (Eogan 1997, 218).

These erasures and overlays (Cochrane 2009) indicate a mutability to the visual appearance of both individual decorated stones, and the way in which they operated as part of a wider architectural scheme. This is corroborated by the particular placement of many of the dressed and decorated stones from the Ness of Brodgar. Although most of these were placed so as to be conspicuously visible, many other examples were hidden from view during the occupation of the buildings, suggesting that their visual appreciation was not a consistent concern (Card and Thomas 2012; Thomas 2016). Even with those stones placed in prominent positions, the ephemeral nature of the incised lines, combined with the palimpsest effect of the layers of subsequent working, means that their motifs are only discernible through the use of controlled raking light photography or Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI; see below). The ambiguity of these carvings’ motifs, deliberately marked, yet often hiding in plain sight, further suggests that approaches which focus purely on static aspects of their appearance – the way they look at one point in time – might be misleading. These observations demand an approach that looks beyond simple formal analysis of decoration to explore the dynamic process of mark-making through time (Thomas 2016).

I will develop these arguments later in this chapter, but it is important first to set these discussions within the wider context of art and architecture in Neolithic Orkney.

Art and architecture in Neolithic Orkney

The buildings and monuments of Neolithic Orkney need little introduction (see Fig. 9.1). The quality and durability of the islands’ flagstone bedrock as a building material, combined with a relatively undeveloped landscape, has left an archaeological record of stone-built tombs, houses and standing stones from the last six millennia, which is almost unparalleled in Europe (Thomas 2016, 29). Funerary architecture takes a variety of forms but has tended to be categorised into two distinct forms: stalled,
or Orkney-Cromarty cairns, and Maeshowe-type passage graves, which tend to comprise a long passage leading to a central chamber with side cells. Neolithic house architecture appears to mirror the style of tombs, with two main forms apparent: linear forms subdivided by orthostats, as seen in stalled cairns, and typified by the dwellings seen at the Knap of Howar, Papa Westray; and a cruciform arrangement seen in dwellings such as those at Skara Brae and the Links of Noltland, which appears to reflect the same concentric ordering of space seen in the Maeshowe-type tombs.

Until recently, it had been assumed that these apparent differences related to chronological developments, with the linear architectural arrangements considered earlier, and the concentric ordering of space a development of the Later Neolithic. This simple division of styles appeared to be supported by the material culture found in those buildings, with round-based pottery, such as Unstan Ware, associated with stalled cairns and linear houses, and Grooved Ware pottery appearing as a later style in Maeshowe-type tombs and at Skara Brae. Increasingly refined chronologies, however, have allowed a re-assessment of the development and occupation of these apparently different forms of architecture, and a more nuanced picture is now emerging (Richards et al. 2016; Richards and Jones 2016; Bayliss et al. 2017; Card et al. 2017). Dated human bone from Quanterness, St Ola suggests that passage grave architecture may have begun in Orkney as early as 3400 cal. BC (Bayliss et al. 2017, 1184), thus contemporary with many stalled cairns, and older than many dated linear-style houses, such as those at the Braes of Ha’Breck, Wyre (Lee and Thomas 2012) and Smerquoy, St Ola (Gee et al. 2016). This early date is significant. Accepting that Orcadian passage graves were first constructed in the middle centuries of the fourth millennium cal. BC would put them amongst the earliest examples in Britain and Ireland (Bayliss et al. 2017, 1184).

Despite the remarkable preservation of Neolithic buildings in Orkney, until recently there were relatively few recorded examples of Neolithic passage grave art. Only three Orcadian sites were listed in the main inventory for Elizabeth Shee Twohig’s *Megalithic Art in Northwest Europe*: the Holm of Papa Westray South and Eday Manse tombs, and Pickaquoy near Kirkwall (Shee Twohig 1981, 227–28).

Measuring nearly 38 × 20 m, the Holm of Papa Westray South passage grave comprises a long central chamber leading off to 12 cells (Davidson and Henshall 1989, 121). During 19th-century investigations of the site, first by F. W. L. Thomas, and then by George Petrie, up to eleven examples of pecked curvilinear and geometric motifs were noted on the stonework within the main chamber (Thomas 1852, 127–30; Petrie 1857, 61; RCAHMS 1946, 186; Davidson and Henshall 1989, 81, plate 24). The stonework deteriorated until the tomb was taken into Guardianship in 1929, leaving many of the carvings barely discernible, but ongoing fieldwork at the site is revealing both the location of many of these, and further unrecorded markings. One stone in particular has attracted attention for its ‘eyebrow motif’, which is shared
with one of the decorated stones from the Links of Noltland (Fig. 9.2). Parallels can also be drawn with the markings on the ‘Westray Wifie’ or ‘Orkney Venus’ figurine recovered from the settlement (Moore and Wilson 2011; see also Chapter 8 this volume), and some of the designs on the Folkton drums (RCAHMS 1946, 189; Jones et al. 2015).

In 1861, an elaborately decorated stone from the island of Eday was donated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland by Robert Hebden (Gibson Craig 1863, 185). It has a pair of spirals and two sets of concentric circles, and a third and fourth set of circles just visible where it is broken along one long edge. It had been recovered from a ruinous mound, which appears to have once been a Neolithic passage grave, destroyed in 1821 for the construction of the adjacent United Presbyterian church. It would be another 40 years before any details of the destruction were recorded, with the retrospective accounts describing a long passage opening out in several sub-circular cells, within a building whose size and layout invite comparison with the Holm of Papa Westray South tomb. Hebden found the stone lying face down at the entrance to one of the passages (Davidson and Henshall 1989, 117), and although early accounts describe it as having been split in order to be used as a lintel in the construction of the church (Gibson Craig 1863, 186), the other half of the stone has never been found.

A further pecked spiral decorated stone from Orkney was donated to the National Museum Scotland in 1864. This had been removed from a site at Pickaquoy, near Kirkwall, which was (badly) excavated by James Farrer in 1853 and recorded a few years later (Petrie 1857, 61). Although the site’s original form is not quite clear, the decorated stone was found built upright into the wall of one of two cist-like cells within a stone building. A cup-marked stone was also found but has since been lost.

It would be more than a century until another decorated stone was recorded from Orkney. In 1981, quarrying at Pierowall, Westray, disturbed a complex multi-period prehistoric site (Sharples 1984). This comprised the remains of a chambered tomb, which had been demolished and paved over, with an Iron Age re-occupation, which saw a roundhouse constructed on the site. A large decorated stone was found in two pieces during the early works and can be considered one of the finest examples of Neolithic carving from Orkney. Covered with pecked and smoothed spirals and concentric arcs, the stone was interpreted as the lintel for the tomb entrance. Two smaller stones, decorated with pecked spirals, were recovered from the quarry spoil heaps but their original position is unknown (Sharples 1984, 4–5).

The decorated stones from the Holm of Papa Westray South, Eday Manse, Pickaquoy and Pierowall Quarry compare favourably with the better-known
examples of passage grave art from Ireland (Shee Twohig 1997, 387). These examples have dominated discussions of ‘megalithic art’ in Orkney and are frequently cited as evidence of the links between Irish passage graves and Maeshowe-type tombs (Eogan 1992, 123). But, as the following discussion demonstrates, their style is actually atypical for Orkney, and only represents one of several types of Neolithic stone-working and decoration found in architectural settings.

Just a few years after the discovery of the Pierowall Stone, the possibility of a rather different, and subtler, form of passage grave decoration emerged when Patrick Ashmore reanalysed an incised motif on one of the internal orthostats within Maeshowe (Ashmore 1986). This had been dismissed as a Norse doodle since the 1860s, but Ashmore was the first to note its similarity to decoration found on stones within the buildings at Skara Brae, and also the Brodgar Stone, a heavily decorated slab found in the 1920s, and which we now know came from one of the structures at the Ness of Brodgar. He also recorded further potential Neolithic incised motifs in the passage grave (Ashmore 1986, 58–59). A decade later, incised markings were identified within the semi-subterranean tomb at Crantit, excavated in 1998 (Ballin Smith 2014, 28, illus. 29), and around the same time, Richard Bradley and his team noted further unrecorded markings in Maeshowe, and in the passage graves of Cuween, Wideford, Quoyness and the Holm of Papa Westray South (Bradley 1998; Bradley et al. 2001). Ongoing fieldwork by the author has recorded further carvings at these sites (Thomas 2015b, Appendix 1), with almost all of the designs comprising linear patterns of vague intersecting lines occasionally forming chevron or cross-and-lozenge motifs. They are mostly so lightly incised as to be barely visible, with many situated in tight corners or low to the ground, locations which are not easily seen. Of the surviving passage tombs with decoration, only the Holm of Papa Westray South has pecked motifs in addition to incised designs, although some of the pick-dressing within Maeshowe should be considered decorative, and in at least one case overlies an incised motif (Thomas 2016, Chapter 3). There are currently no known Neolithic carvings from within stalled cairns.

The majority of known examples of decorated Neolithic stonework from Orkney, however, come from settlement contexts. In addition to Skara Brae and the Ness of Brodgar, carvings have been found in situ on walls and other architectural elements at the Links of Noltland, Westray (Moore and Wilson 2011), Smerquoy, St Ola (Gee et al. 2016), and Howe, Stromness (Ballin Smith 1994), with decorated stones also found in rubble layers associated with domestic buildings at Green, Eday (Coles et al. 2010), Pool, Sanday (Hunter et al. 2007), and Barnhouse, Stenness (Downes and Richards 2005). These examples share the diversity of motifs and techniques of execution seen in passage grave art.

At the Links of Noltland, Westray, where the famous ‘Orkney Venus’ carved sandstone figurine was found in 2009, ongoing excavations have produced a range of cup-marked, pecked, incised and carved decorated stones with a variety of linear and curvilinear motifs (Moore and Wilson 2011). Several of these were
found *in situ*. In 2013, the excavation of one of the dwellings at Smerquoy, St Ola, led to the surprising discovery of a decorated *in situ* stone by the entrance to the house, with pecked joined spirals strikingly similar to those seen on the stones from Pierowall and Eday Manse. Radiocarbon dating has allowed it to be provisionally assigned to c. 3200BC – currently Orkney’s oldest known Neolithic art (Gee *et al.* 2016). The decorated flagstone slab found at Green on Eday in 2010 has a series of pecked designs including a triangle (see Fig. 9.3), and several conjoined spirals, similar to the designs seen in the Holm of Papa Westray South tomb. These pecked motifs overlie – but do not respect – a series of fine, incised lines. The stone itself appears to have been deliberately placed in the entrance to a dwelling as an act of ‘decommissioning’ (Coles *et al.* 2010, 16). A flagstone slab with carved and pecked chevron and dot motifs was found in a similar demolition context infilling Structure 9 at Pool on Sanday (Hunter 2007, 49, illus. 3.18).

Two decorated stones were found during the excavation of the complex multi-period site at Howe, Stromness (Ballin Smith 1994). The site originally comprised a pair of conjoined houses, which were overlain by a Maeshowe-type tomb. This had a broch superimposed on its partly levelled remains in the Iron Age, at which point the tomb was re-used as a souterrain (Davidson and Henshall 1989, 82). The passage grave had masonry, which was on a par with that at Maeshowe, and included a clay capped mound, an external ditch and a probable standing stone (Ballin Smith 1994, 10–19). A multi-cupped stone was incorporated into the tomb facade, and a fragment with a pecked zig-zag design was also recovered from an Iron Age rubble context on the site (Ballin
Smith, 13, 209–210, illus. 127). Despite its late association, its style compares well to carvings from both the Holm of Papa Westray South and Pool, and is likely to be Neolithic.

A single decorated slab was also recorded during the excavations at Barnhouse. This was recovered from the surface of the ploughed field, but probably came from a lower course of walling in either House 5c or 5d (Downes and Richards 2005, Fig. 4.29). This has a range of incised and carved zig-zags and cross-and-lozenge motifs and compares well to examples from both Skara Brae and at the Ness of Brodgar. Several further probable Neolithic decorated stones have been identified as re-used in later contexts in Orkney, including a spiral-pecked stone from a broch site at Redland, Firth, which is now on display at the NMS. A comprehensive discussion of these can be found in Thomas 2016.

Decorated stonework is now known from a range of Neolithic sites in Orkney (Fig. 9.1) and can be considered a common and integral feature of both domestic and funerary architecture. This challenges what is often seen as an exclusive association between passage graves and art and opens up the discussion to see mark-making as a fundamental and dynamic part of lived experience. Many of the above examples, however, are individual finds or from ambiguous contexts. It is only at Skara Brae and the Ness of Brodgar where the size of the assemblages allows for a meaningful understanding of how stone-working and decoration might have worked within a wider architectural scheme.

**Skara Brae**

A 5,000-year-old village of stone-built houses, with walls surviving to head height in places, and complete with furniture and artefacts, Skara Brae is Orkney’s most visited archaeological site (Historic Scotland 2014). It comprises the remains, in varying degrees of preservation, of over ten stone-built dwellings (Fig. 9.4 below), joined by paved passegeways, and as such provides an unparalleled resource for understanding Neolithic settlement architecture (Richards 1991, 25). The buildings are associated with an abundance of worked
bone, stone tools, flint and pottery: one of the largest collections of Neolithic artefacts in Britain. The richness of the site's artefact record competes with its sizeable assemblage of decorated architectural stones. Until the excavations at the Ness of Brodgar, Skara Brae produced the largest known grouping of decorated architectural stone from Orkney (Thomas 2016, Chapter 5).

Exposed after storm damage in around 1850 (Petrie 1867, 201), the remains were left exposed for over seventy years before any systematic investigation took place with Gordon Childe's excavations in the late 1920s. Early accounts reported 'not the slightest trace of any pattern or ornament' (Laing 1867) and it was not until Gordon Childe's fieldwork that decoration ranging from 'random scribblings' to 'carefully executed designs' were noted, particularly concentrated in the passages and in Houses 7 and 8 (Childe 1931, 150). Further decorated stones were recovered from secure contexts during David Clarke's 1972–74 excavations (Clarke 1976; Shepherd 2017), with subsequent field surveys by Elizabeth Shee Twöhig (1981) and Alexandra Shepherd (2000; 2017) adding to the assemblage. Fieldwork undertaken by the author between 2011 and 2014 again added to the number of known examples, and the assemblage of decorated stones from Skara Brae now stands at over a hundred, 75 of which are currently in situ (Thomas 2016, Chapter 5). Nevertheless, the site's primarily domestic nature has meant that these carvings are frequently glossed over in discussions of Neolithic art (e.g. Nash 2012, 137).

The architectural carvings from Skara Brae are overwhelmingly concentrated inside Houses 7 and 8 and the passages, with 27 recorded from House 7 alone. This in part reflects the relative levels of preservation on the site; both Houses 7 and 8 were only exposed by Childe in the 1920s, having been effectively sealed since prehistory, whilst access to House 7 was restricted soon after its excavation (Thomas 2016, 118). Nevertheless, House 7 appears to have been a focus for the settlement throughout its occupation, and the density of decoration within this building is maybe an indication of its 'special' nature (Richards 1991, 36). The decoration frequently appears in 'clusters', often with three or four decorated stones appearing next to one another as part of a scheme. In House 7, particular groupings have been recorded in the corners of the building, and around the right-hand (western) box-bed and the western wall, which overlay two inhumation burials. The apparent right-hand emphasis in the location of markings (Richards 1991, 36) mirrors the spatial pattern seen in passage graves both in Orkney (Bradley et al. 2001, 60) and Ireland (Herity 1974, 123). The density of decoration within House 7 extends to its exterior and Passage C, which runs around the building. Within both the passages and buildings, decoration seems to be concentrated at thresholds and changes in direction, a pattern which again mirrors that seen in passage graves, both in Orkney and Ireland.

In common with the decoration seen in Orcadian passage graves, Skara Brae's assemblage is dominated by incised and carved decoration. Seven in situ stones have pecked decoration, comprising crude pecked lines. In some instances,
incised motifs are overlain by carvings or pecked motifs and appear to have acted as ‘sketches’ for the subsequent marks. Many of the incised designs are found on stones, which had been polished prior to incising, an effect which makes the marks more prominent and which has also been noted on several of the stones from the Ness of Brodgar (see below). Only one stone, an orthostat at the entrance to Cell F, has cup-marks; these overlie incised and carved markings (Childe 1931, Plate LIV).

The decoration at Skara Brae is overwhelmingly in the form of linear, geometric motifs, particularly parallel and diagonal intersecting lines, which frequently intersect to form chevrons and zig-zag patterns (Thomas 2016, 116–18). The style of these compares well to designs found both in portable stone objects and artefacts in other media, including pottery and worked bone. The appearance of comparable designs across a range of materials and artefacts might suggest the importance of motifs within an overall decorative scheme. But with the exception of the heavily-carved orthostat forming the edge of the right-hand box-bed in House 7 (see Fig. 9.5 above), the role of architectural decoration on the site appears ‘almost secretive, rather than one of conspicuous display’ (Shepherd 2000, 141). Even where the marks are visible, they are frequently very faintly incised as to be barely visible. These lines may have originally had pigment rubbed into them to make them more prominent (Bradley 1998, 390; Isbister 2000, 194), but across the site many of the incised stones appear at a low level at 50 cm above the floor level or lower, raising further questions about their intended visibility (Thomas 2016, 119).

Indeed, several stones in House 7 have decoration that would not have been visible once the building was in use. These include the heavily decorated slab, which seems to have once formed part of the sub-mural cist under the west wall (Shepherd 2017), and a stone found by Childe within the bench opposite the dresser. This was found with a thick deposit of ochre on its upper surface, but also had decoration on its inner face, which comprised several parallel vertical lines deeply carved into the long edge of the stone; in several places finer incised lines are visible underlying the carving and at least two of the lines have pecking over the top. The elaborately decorated slab found in the 1970s excavations, which had been laid, apparently ‘re-used as an ordinary building slab in a wall’

**Figure 9.5** The heavily decorated orthostat forming the edge of the westernmost ‘box-bed’ in House 7, Skara Brae (detail).

(IMAGE: © ANTONIA THOMAS)
(Clarke 1976, 20) in a structure predating Passage A (Shepherd 2000) may also have been placed in an act of deliberate concealment (Thomas 2016, 120).

There are suggestions at Skara Brae, therefore, that some decorated stones were revisited, and the original marks were added to, augmented or overwritten. There are also indications that other decorated stones may have been hidden from view for long phases of the buildings' occupation. These observations suggest that the visual appearance of the stones was a dynamic characteristic that was able to change through time. It was neither static nor consistent. Without dismantling stonework through excavation, however, we simply do not know the extent of other hidden decoration. At Skara Brae, as with the extant passage graves in Orkney, the discussion is necessarily limited to the surface of the buildings and we are left with only a snapshot of the true assemblage. In addition, the long exposure of the buildings has led to questions over the authenticity of some of the carvings (Nash 2012, 137), something that could also be argued for the incised motifs in passage graves (Bradley et al. 2001, 55). The discovery of large numbers of in situ stones from the Ness of Brodgar (Fig. 9.7) from sealed deposits, demolishes any of these doubts, and that is where the discussion now turns.

The Ness of Brodgar

Almost equidistant, and visible, from the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness, with the great passage grave of Maeshowe 1.5 km to the east, and Barnhouse just 300 m away, Brodgar Farm occupies a special location (Thomas 2016, 123). In 1925, the tenant farmer at Brodgar unearthed a decorated slab during ploughing at the farm; now known as the Brodgar Stone, this has been on display at the National Museum of Scotland since the 1920s (Thomas 2016, 3; Fig. 9.6 on next page). The stone's long edge had been carved with cross-and-lozenge, zig-zag, chevron and diagonal line motifs organised into eight separate parallel bands of decoration. These appear to have been 'sketched out' with lightly incised lines prior to being more deeply carved. In addition, a cup-mark has been ground into one of the bands of carved decoration, with pecking forming a triple-cup-motif overlying one of the other banded designs (Thomas 2016, 192; Thomas in press). It appears, therefore, that this stone had been subjected to a sequence of attention of incising, followed by carving, followed by pecking, and grinding.

Incredibly, nothing else of archaeological interest was reported from the site until 2003, when a notched slab was disturbed in the same field, again during ploughing, and provided the catalyst for the excavation of one of the most remarkable Neolithic sites in Europe. The site has been the focus of excavation by the Archaeology Institute (Fig. 9.7), University of the Highlands and Islands under the direction of Nick Card, since 2004 (Towers et al. 2017). The remains of over 15 monumental structures, many of which are over 10 metres in length, have since been exposed in Trench P alone. These buildings combine elements more commonly associated with domestic structures such as dressers and hearths, with standing stones and pick-dressed masonry, features
Figure 9.6 The Brodgar Stone, found in 1925.

(Photograph by Thomas Kent and reproduced with the kind permission of Orkney Library and Archives)

Figure 9.7 Aerial view of the Ness of Brodgar during excavation (looking SE).

(Image © Hugo Anderson-Whymark)
which had previously only been found in funerary or ceremonial contexts in Orkney (Thomas 2016, 123). Research and excavation on the site is ongoing, but recent dating evidence from the site is suggesting that most of the monumental structures currently exposed on the site were in existence by the 30th century cal. B. C. (Card et al. 2017).

In 2006, the excavation of Trench J led to the discovery of a thin slab within the upper fill of a cist bearing cross-and-lozenge decoration; the following year, two conjoining pieces were found. Incised decoration was subsequently noted on stonework within the walls of all the structures within the main excavation area of Trench P. These carvings were comparable to examples previously recorded in situ at Skara Brae, Maeshowe, Cuween, Wideford and Quoynness. The site has since (as of the end of 2017) produced an assemblage of over 700 stones with deliberate, non-functional, working and decoration (Thomas 2016; Towers et al. 2017). Some 500 of these have been found in situ within secure contexts, with over 200 found in position forming primary architectural elements of buildings. As such, this extraordinary assemblage allows a unique insight into the placement and appreciation of decorated architectural in the Orcadian Neolithic.

At Skara Brae, the decoration is concentrated in the passages and in Houses 7 and 8. At the Ness of Brodgar, decorated and dressed stones appear across the site, in every standing structural element of each building, within floor deposits and in demolition debris. In many of the structures, walling survives to over 1 m in height, with decoration appearing at all levels within that stonework. As at Skara Brae, and the Orcadian passage graves, incised markings are frequently found at floor level, in tight corners or other awkward locations in the buildings, with decoration often occurring in clusters of three or four incised stones. There is an extraordinary diversity of stone-working techniques. The assemblage is characterised as much by its variety as by its size, consisting of worked architectural stone and portable pieces with lightly incised ‘scratch art’ and deeply carved designs; ground and pecked cup-marks; and densely pick dressed masonry (Card and Thomas 2012; Thomas 2016).

Incising is typically shallow and often takes the form of little more than scratches, executed with flint and often barely visible once finished. In several cases, the scratches appear to have provided sketches, which were subsequently formalised with further incised or carved markings. In both cases, sharp flint tools seem to have been used, with the deep V-profile of carved lines made by repeated use. As at other sites, such as Skara Brae and Quoynness, several of the stones from the Ness of Brodgar appear to have been polished prior to being incised. Polishing the stone transforms the surface and enhances not only the richness of the stone’s natural colour, but also the contrast between the incised lines and the surface of the stone, creating an effect similar to that conjectured for the application of paint prior to incising (Bradley et al. 2001, 54; Thomas 2016, 161).
Many stones – usually the coarser-grained sandstones – show signs of deliberate pecking, although this is often random and does not form coherent patterns. In several cases it overlies, or obliterates, underlying incised markings. Less commonly, pecking is used to create more distinctive designs, such as meandering lines, or circular motifs, such as the singular cup-and-ring marked stone from the site (Thomas 2016, 162, Fig. 125). In several cases, discrete peck-marks appear as less confident versions of cup-marks but can be considered a variation on the same theme.

Pick-dressing is relatively rare in Orkney, and with the exception of the Ness of Brodgar, is only found at Maeshowe, the Dwarfie Stone, and the Stones of Stenness. Over a hundred pick-dressed stones have now been recovered from the Ness of Brodgar, many of which were in situ within walls and other structural elements. In some cases, it represents a finishing touch to the masonry, whereas in others it can be considered as a form of decoration in its own right (Thomas 2016, 150). Three stones have bas relief dressing, a style that has so far only been recorded in Orkney at the Ness of Brodgar, with chiselling only recorded there and at Maeshowe; at both sites it overlies pick-dressing.

True cup-marks are unusual throughout Orkney as a whole, yet frequent at the Ness of Brodgar, as is pecking – either by direct or indirect percussion. This can be discrete, forming crude circular areas or cup-marks, or more random, the latter often defacing or obliterating earlier marks. Discrete pecked motifs are often subsequently smoothed with grinding to form cup-marks, the smaller of which (c. 10–20 mm diameter) are often drilled. Curvilinear, meandering and proto-spiral designs are rare. Angular motifs – chevrons/zig-zags, triangular, quadrangular or scalariform signs – dominate the assemblage, with parallel vertical lines and chevrons/zig-zags the most frequent designs. Banded designs, similar to the Brodgar Stone, have motifs that are contained within parallel lines, typically along the edge of a block but also occurring on the upper face of slabs. Chevrons, zig-zags, parallel lines, nets and cross-and-lozenge designs are common and appear throughout the main structures. Discrete motifs are relatively unusual, with the opposed-fan motif (dubbed the ‘Brodgar butterfly’ and peculiar to the Ness of Brodgar), a rare example (Fig. 9.10).

**Image and Process at the Ness of Brodgar**

In terms of both motifs and techniques of execution, decorated stones from the Ness of Brodgar can be directly compared to the carvings from Skara Brae and those found in both passage graves and other contexts in Orkney. To a certain extent, there is a correlation between the type of stone and the technique of working. Cup-marking and pick-dressing appear predominantly on the coarser grained sandstones, with incised and carved decoration associated with laminar flagstones. Meandering and curvilinear designs tend to be pecked, with incised and carved decoration almost exclusively angular in form, reflecting the particular affordances of the material (Thomas 2016, 163). Nevertheless, the correspondence between method, material and motif only holds partially true.
Many decorated stones exhibit several techniques and stages of working, and designs frequently combine several motifs and processes of working (Thomas 2016, Chapter 7). Overlays and sequences of attention can be identified on a large number of the stones (see Fig. 9.8 above), and these are the focus in the following section.

Many examples have such a confusion of overlying, yet faint, markings that any identification of motif becomes arbitrary and subjective. Crucially, however, not all of these palimpsests can be understood in the same way. In both the manner in which the overlays take place, and the contexts in which the decorated stones are found, there are subtle, yet significant differences. These mirror the different types of palimpsests in both graffiti and rock art compositions identified by Mark Sapwell (2017). His scheme has proved useful to understanding the sequences of attention seen in many of the decorated stones from the Ness of Brodgar and is referred to in the discussion below.

The RTI capture of stone SF7501 demonstrates the type of decorative palimpsests encountered at the Ness of Brodgar (Fig. 9.9). First exposed during excavation in 2010, there was nothing initially remarkable about this large (900 x 750 x 40 mm) flagstone slab. Flaked around its edges to fit the adjacent slabs, it formed part of the stone paving, which ran around the exterior of Structure 10. It was only during cleaning of the stone for detailed photographs that the sheer quantity of incised lines started to become visible on the upper surface. There are several layers or stages to the carvings; chevron, zig-zags and lozenges filled with ‘net’ motifs become identifiable with closer inspection.
On SF7501, incised lines forming nets, lozenges, chevrons and zig-zags have been repeatedly worked, on top of one another, into the surface of the stone, effectively drawing attention to, yet concealing, the primary markings. They represent what Sapwell (2017) has described as a *singular palimpsest*. In Sapwell’s scheme, this describes images that are added accumulatively to one place to support and continue a shared idea. In these palimpsests, the precise placement of markings is insignificant, and the visibility of the decoration appears to be secondary to the act of accumulative marking itself. *Process* is more important than *image*. The decoration on slab SF7501 fits within this scheme. It presents a paradox seen in many of the other stones from the site, as it is frequently the most extensively decorated stones that are the most faintly marked, and thus the least visible. Either through the slightness of their markings, or through the confusion of the overlays, the primary motifs on these stones are in effect, *hiding in plain sight*. The continued visual appreciation of the original motifs is not as important, it seems, as the continuation of the iterative process of marking.

These singular palimpsests form a distinct group and can be compared with other examples of overlayering seen on the site. Following Sapwell’s scheme (2017), these other examples can be described as *multiple palimpsests*. In this group, the primary incised lines are also ‘overwritten’ with further working. But unlike with the singular palimpsests, the secondary working does not reiterate the earliest markings; there is no continuation of a shared idea. Instead, striking singular motifs are carved into the surface of a previously marked stone,
disregarding, and even obliterating, any earlier marks (Fig. 9.10). On SF16868, for example, a slab that formed part of a foundation deposit underneath one of the buttresses within Structure 10 on the site, a deep cross-and-lozenge motif has been carved into the face, overlying but not respecting, a series of finer incised lines underneath. Similarly, on SF16189 several discrete ‘butterfly’ motifs have been deeply carved into the face of a flagstone slab, which had earlier been extensively marked with incised lines. The slab was used as part of a closing deposit blocking a late entrance in Structure 12. In Sapwell’s scheme, these multiple palimpsests exhibit a highly selective and deliberate form of mark addition, but the relationship between the earlier marks and any subsequent attention is not iterative or respectful (Sapwell 2017, 361–63). Unlike the singular palimpsest seen in SF7501, in SF16868 and SF16189 the finer incised lines of the primary marking are completely disregarded with the carving of bold, discrete motifs on top. The event of the final image takes precedence over the durational biography of the previous marks.

Whilst many decorated stones from the Ness of Brodgar show sequences of attention, these palimpsests manifest themselves in different ways. In the singular palimpsests, such as SF7501 shown in Figure 9.9 above, the layering of incised lines allows individual motifs to become overwritten, continued but also effectively concealed. In the multiple palimpsests, such as SF16868 and SF16189 shown in Figure 9.10, the finer incised lines are completely disregarded with the carving of a deeper motif on top. With the Brodgar Stone (Fig. 9.6) and SF3860 (Fig. 9.8), there is a further treatment applied to the stone, such as pecking or cup-marking.

To understand why these differences are significant, and what they tell us about the relationship between image and process, we need to examine the different contexts in which these stones are found. The singular palimpsests, such as SF7501 (Fig. 9.9) tend to appear in settings that would have been exposed for a continued period of time during occupation; the flagstone paving around Structure 10, or the wall faces of buildings in Structures 7 and 11. Over a long duration of appreciation, additional carvings were repeatedly added in response to the primary marks. This is in contrast to stones that exhibit multiple palimpsests, where striking singular designs were carved with little regard for any earlier marks or motifs. These appear in contexts that relate to events of relatively short duration, such as the foundation deposit of SF16868 in Structure 10 or blocking in the case of the closing deposit of SF16868. In these cases, the stones themselves became ‘hidden’ soon after deposition, concealed within blocking or in the foundation of a wall. The stone from Green, Eday (Fig. 9.3), is a further example of this type of multiple palimpsest; it was itself found within a closing deposit.

This relationship between sequence of attention, deposition and context, highlights a tension between image and process that is seen in the placement of many of the other decorated stones at the Ness of Brodgar. Although the excavations are still at a relatively early stage, in the few cases where walls have
been dismantled, large numbers of stones with ‘hidden’ decoration have been found. These can be seen in particular with Structures 7 and 11. Both buildings had a considerable number of decorated stones, which were visible in the main wall-faces, but in each case, the dismantling of these walls led to the discovery of further decorated stones, whose decoration would have been ‘hidden’ during the building’s occupation. In the case of Structure 11, over a third of the building’s assemblage (21/54) was hidden.

More importantly, in both structures, the specific decoration, positioning and placement of the incised markings on the ‘hidden’ and ‘visible’ stones forms a striking pattern. Those stones with decoration that would have been able to have been seen during the occupation of the building tended to be extensively incised all along their edges. There is an absence of discrete motif, and the markings are the result of repeated incising and sequences of carving; intense palimpsestic overlays, which reference a long duration of appreciation. But the stones with decoration that was hidden during occupation, i.e. within walls, tended to exhibit singular, discrete motifs: the result of a single act or event of carving, on their upper faces. It is difficult to explain such a pattern if the presence of the hidden stones were due to simple re-use.

In the multiple palimpsests described earlier, it appeared that discrete, striking, singular motifs were carved, with a complete disregard for what went before, as part of an event. This particular pattern of deposition is paralleled with the ‘hidden’ stones in Structures 7 and 11; and in both these buildings, it is even possible to tell when the hidden stones might have been marked. In each case, removing just one of the overlying stones in the wall (the areas shown shaded in Fig. 9.11) revealed the entirety of the motif on the face of the stone in the course beneath. The faces of these stones were marked mid-way through construction, at a point between the first stone being placed on top, and the second which hid the decoration. This shows that the builders were incising the stones whilst they were building – by laying a stone, then incising the area left exposed on the stone beneath, then covering up those marks with another stone and continuing the process. This practice of absorption would have effectively woven the decoration of the stones into the fabric of the structure as part of event of construction.1

Discussion

Many studies of Neolithic art and architecture have tended to focus upon image and form to the exclusion of process (Jones et al. 2016). The ‘decoration’ of architectural stonework has often been considered just as the term implies: superficial and belonging to a single phase. The recognition that many of the worked and decorated stones from the Ness of Brodgar exhibit several stages of working, decoration and reworking, suggests something rather different. The palimpsests discussed in this chapter demand a more nuanced approach, which takes account of the subtleties of appreciation and duration on site, and the performative, and social, practices of stone-working (Thomas 2016). They
highlight the importance of context for understanding the relationship between image and process, and how decorated stones were created, deposited and interacted with over time.

Similar palimpsests of decoration and stone-working have been recognised in many Irish passage graves (see Chapter 10 this volume). Although incision and picking form the two main techniques in Irish megalithic art, there are very few examples of incised decoration known outside of the Brugh na Bóinne. Picking is the most widely recognised process of stone-working and is characteristic of Irish passage graves (Crawford 1956; Eogan 1997, 218; Shee Twohig 1981, 116–18). It can be described as either ‘confined area’, i.e. filling a particular shape, such as a lozenge or triangle, which had often been outlined earlier by incising; or
spread area picking – either loose, or close – neither of which form particular shapes (Eogan 1997, 218).

As in Orkney, and in particular at the Ness of Brodgar, these different techniques are not mutually exclusive, and many of the stones exhibit sequences of attention. At Knowth Site 1, George Eogan identified five principal stages in successive overlays (Eogan 1997, 222). In his scheme, incised angular motifs such as triangles, lozenges and zig-zags – and the closest comparanda for the Orcadian examples – are always the earliest. In several cases these constitute a composition in their own right, although they also often appear to have acted as sketches or guidelines for subsequent working, usually picked angular motifs. Some stones have further ‘loose area’ picking intruding on these earlier forms of working. At Knowth, a further form of working known as ‘ribbon art’, a confined area picking which forms shapes such as parallel lines and arcs, has also been recognised. This does not respect the earlier motifs or forms. At Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange, a fifth technique of close spread area picking (comparable to the pick-dressing discussed at the Ness of Brodgar) is also widely used, and in each case post-dates and often obliterates earlier working (Eogan 1997, 223–24). Both the ribbon art and close spread area picking compare to the multiple palimpsests from the Ness of Brodgar and described earlier.

As Andrew Cochrane (2009) suggests, the process of erasure and revelation that such palimpsests effect is far from straightforward. Borrowing a term used by the artist Jasper Johns to describe Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, he suggests that the comparable process of successive working seen in Irish passage grave art can be considered as ‘additive subtraction’. Cochrane argues that subsequent working, rather than hiding the primary marks (see Eogan 1997, 221), actually draws attention to what went before, and as such should be considered a transformative act of *creative destruction* (Cochrane 2009, 178). This visual ambiguity is significant. If a design can be added to, defaced, altered or augmented, it indicates that any ‘meaning’ that lies behind the decoration is not static. It disrupts any certainty that decoration might be finished, or that what we see now was ever intended to be the ‘final’ form. It highlights a tension between image and process, which is crucial to understanding decorated stone assemblages (Thomas 2016, 193).

At the Ness of Brodgar, this tension is emphasised by the placement of many of the other decorated stones, in particular those which were built into walls or floors, and which would have been hidden from view during occupation. Looking again to Ireland, we find some striking parallels. The phenomenon of ‘hidden art’ in Irish passage graves has long been recognised, particularly at Newgrange and Knowth where excavations have revealed a large number of examples on inner surfaces of orthostats and kerbstones (Eogan and Cleary 2017, 71). Nevertheless, the significance of stones with concealed decoration has tended to be dismissed: either as evidence of a last-minute change in architectural design (Powell and Daniel 1956, 47), or as amateur trial pieces undertaken by apprentices or labourers (Herity 1974, 186; O’Kelly 1978). More commonly,
stones with hidden decoration are assumed to represent the pragmatic re-use of material from an earlier building (Nash 2007, 138). For example, at Knowth, 24 structural stones within Tombs 1B and 1C are grouped by their shared use of tightly set spirals and/or panels of zig-zags and have been interpreted as re-used from an earlier, unidentified passage grave, Tomb 1A (Eogan and Cleary 2017, 67–68). Significantly, however, their placement appears to have been carefully considered, with particular motifs found in certain locations (Eogan and Cleary 2017, 71). Hidden art, re-used or not, is neither a unitary phenomenon, nor one which can be explained by a universal interpretation (Robin 2009, 185). Context is crucial.

At the Ness of Brodgar, rather than being accidental, or due to simple re-use, in many cases the placement of ‘hidden art’ was deliberate and considered. This can be seen in Structures 7 and 11, where it appears that the wall builders were incorporating the carvings into the buildings by incising stones as they were laying them. Visible at the point of carving and/or placement during construction, then hidden for the remainder of the building’s history, these examples remind us that visibility can not only be shifting and mutable, but is always context dependent (Thomas 2016, 225). This is emphasised by the contexts in which different types of palimpsest are also found across the site. Examples of singular palimpsests, where the reiteration of earlier markings represents the continuation of a shared idea, tend to appear in settings that have seen long durations of appreciation. These contrast with examples of multiple palimpsests, in which striking discrete motifs are carved with little regard for earlier marks. These tend to appear in contexts which relate to events of relatively short duration and are often concealed soon after the final act of carving. As the examples discussed in this chapter highlight, it is not enough to consider whether or not decoration is visible or not, we need to explore the temporality and the context of that visibility (Thomas 2016, 225). To understand the significance of architectural decoration in the Neolithic, therefore, it is essential to consider not only image, but also process.

Note

1 An analogy can also be found with the weaving of Maori ceremonial cloaks. Through a process of weaving and chanting, ancestral spirits are woven into the very fabric of the cloak, infusing it with their power (see Mac Aulay & Te Waru-Rewiri 1996, 200).