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Art in Context: The Decorated Stone Assemblage

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The Ness of Brodgar As it Stands

Edited by
Nick Card
Mark Edmonds
& Anne Mitchell

The Ness of Brodgar As it Stands

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11

Art in context: the decorated stone assemblage

Antonia Thomas

Explore an Orkney beach and you might be lucky enough to find a pebble collectors' prize: a heart-shaped stone, rounded over millennia of fracturing and weathering. When one of the excavation team at the Ness of Brodgar spotted one on site, it immediately caught his eye. Rotating it in his hand, the late afternoon sun glanced across the soft sandstone, revealing faint lines scratched into its surface. The finely incised lattice echoes the fracture patterns visible in Orkney's exposed coastal bedrock, an intersection of art, archaeology, and geology across a vast timescale. Turning the stone between his fingers, the scratched lines faded again, made almost invisible without the sun's raking light.



11.1 SF7870 ©Antonia Thomas

This stone isn't a tool and has no obvious function.

Incised in the same style as many of the building stones on the site, it is a purely personal item, collected some 5000 years ago on a beach, by someone who liked its shape and the way it felt in their hand. The Neolithic was a very different time to our own. But every now and again, we find a connection, and are reminded that in some ways, the people who built and used the Ness of Brodgar were just like us.

Introduction

By now, it should be clear that the Ness of Brodgar is a site of superlatives; its decorated stone assemblage is no exception. Over 900 individual stones with deliberate markings have been recorded from the site: the largest grouping of architecturally situated Neolithic

carvings from a single site anywhere in northern Europe. The collection is characterised as much by its diversity as by its size, with incised, carved, cup-marked, pecked, pick-dressed, chiselled, and painted styles all featuring. Decorated and dressed stones appear across the site, in every area of every building, in a range of different contexts and phases from

floor deposits to demolition debris. But where motifs and patterns can be discerned, the decoration is all abstract and is almost entirely geometric and linear. Only rarely do curvilinear designs such as wavy lines or spirals appear, with decoration dominated by parallel lines, chevrons, zigzags, and crosses. Frequently it only appears as a deliberate mass of intersecting parallel and diagonal lines. The carvings are ubiquitous, and enigmatic.

What makes the assemblage from the Ness of Brodgar truly extraordinary, however, is that so many of these deliberate markings have been found in the exact position, and location, that they were placed around 5000 years ago. Over half of the recorded decorated stones have been found *in situ* within secure Neolithic deposits and structures, with over 200 found in positions forming primary architectural elements of buildings. This means that we can examine the particular context in which stones were decorated, placed, and appreciated. We might not be able to ever know the intentions behind these enigmatic carvings, but the insights gained from their contextual analysis means that we can

grasp the ways in which they were *meaningful* in a way that has never before been possible.

This chapter summarises the work undertaken on these decorated stones since the first example was recorded from the modern excavations in 2006. It outlines the assemblage's defining characteristics in terms of motifs, methods of execution and positioning within the site, and compares these to other examples known from Britain and Europe in the Neolithic. One particularly intriguing aspect of many of the carvings at the Ness of Brodgar is that whilst many examples of decoration were deliberately placed for maximum visual impact, others were so faint as to be barely seen at all. Many examples of decoration were only visible at certain times, and often only fleetingly before they were either concealed within the fabric of buildings or obscured by subsequent carvings. This variety belies a catch-all designation of these carvings as art, and the purely *visual* consumption that this term implies. It suggests that other aspects, such as the process of working and decorating the stones, and their context and placement, may be key to their significance.



11.2 SF16258 during removal from Trench P © Antonia Thomas

The bigger picture

The decorated stone from the Ness of Brodgar can be understood as part of a much broader tradition of Neolithic architectural ornament recorded across north-west Europe. Fine examples can be found around the Gulf of Morbihan in Brittany, with the tomb of Gavrinis particularly heavily decorated. Each of its passage and chamber uprights is carved with elaborate abstract curvilinear designs, many of which would not have been visible once built.¹ In Britain and Ireland, the greatest density of decorated passage graves is found around the Irish Sea, with the most well-known the sites of Knowth, Newgrange, and Dowth in the Boyne Valley of eastern Ireland. Comprising several hundred individual stones bearing elaborate pecked, pick-dressed, and incised decoration, between them these sites contain the richest concentration of megalithic carvings in western Europe.² Different styles and motifs are in evidence at each site.

At the main tomb at Knowth, serpentine and curvilinear motifs such as spirals and arcs are common; in the satellite tombs more angular designs as well as incised motifs appear.³ Many stones were pick-dressed before carving, and incised lines frequently underlie pecked motifs. The internal decoration at Newgrange is comparable to Gavrinis, with carved and pecked spirals, lozenges, zigzags and triangles featuring heavily in the passage's orthostats, corbelled chamber, roof and kerb.⁴ The Dowth passage graves are similarly extensively decorated,⁵ and at Fourknocks, the passage and cell lintels have elaborately pecked parallel zigzag and lozenge designs; other stones have spirals, chevrons and curvilinear motifs.⁶ Of the 27 passage graves at Loughcrew, 14 have decoration, characterised by 'random' groupings of concentric circles, dot-and-circle, serpentine and U-motifs, and some radials and parallel lines.⁷

Across the Irish Sea, on the island of Anglesey in North Wales, Barcloidiad y Gawres provides the closest British comparison for the Irish passage graves, with pecked horizontal bands, spirals, lozenges and chevrons, similar to those seen at Newgrange surviving on several stones.⁸ Also on Anglesey, the passage grave of Bryn Celli Ddu

is renowned for its 'Pattern Stone', a monolith which had been extensively decorated with picked parallel meandering lines on both faces and its former top edge.⁹ A small number of decorated passage graves are also recorded from southwest Scotland and northwest England, whilst many other Neolithic sites across Britain and Ireland have produced stray decorated stones, suggesting that there were once many more *in situ* examples.¹⁰

Outside of the Ness of Brodgar, Neolithic decoration has been recorded at a number of domestic and funerary sites in Orkney. The Holm of Papa Westray South is the only Orcadian tomb with extant pecked decoration; a recent re-examination of the site's stonework suggests that there may be more than 30 surviving examples of decoration.¹¹ The carvings comprise both curvilinear and angular motifs, with the tomb's 'eyebrow' motifs attracting particular attention. Parallels can also be drawn with the markings on both the architectural stonework from the Links of Noltdland, and the 'Westray Wifie' figurine recovered from the settlement, and some of the designs on the Folkton drums.¹² Other examples, such as the elaborately decorated stone from Eday Manse, which has pecked spirals and sets of concentric circles, and the stone marked with concentric rings from Pickaquooy, are from sites destroyed in the 19th century.¹³ The large decorated stone found during quarrying at Pierowall, Westray in 1981 is one of the finest examples of Neolithic carving from Orkney.¹⁴ Covered with pecked and smoothed spirals and concentric arcs, the stone was interpreted as the lintel for the tomb entrance. Two smaller, spiral-pecked stones were also found.

These records, and the Pierowall Stone in particular, compare favourably with the better-known examples of Irish passage grave art.¹⁵ But the carvings found in Orcadian passage graves are characterised by a different,



11.3 The Pierowall Stone ©Rebecca Marr

and rather subtler style. In the 1980s, Patrick Ashmore reinterpreted an incised motif (previously dismissed as a Norse ‘doodle’) on one of the internal orthostats in Maeshowe as Neolithic, at the same time recording further examples of a potentially similar date.¹⁶ Similar incised markings are now known from the tombs at Crantit, Cuween, Wideford, and Quoyness.¹⁷ Although fine stone dressing and chiselling can be seen in Maeshowe, at all of the other sites, designs comprise scratched marks of faint, often barely visible, motifs – a far cry from the visually arresting designs usually associated with passage grave art.

The unusual nature of Neolithic decoration in Orkney becomes even more apparent when we consider that here, and in contrast to other regions, stone-built houses survive alongside contemporary passage graves. Indeed, the majority of known examples of decorated Neolithic stonework have been recorded from non-funerary or domestic sites like Skara Brae. Its houses and passages have produced 111 decorated stones, with 75 still *in situ*. Carvings have also been found within the houses at the Links of Noltland, Smerquoy, and Howe, and in rubble layers associated with domestic buildings at Green, Pool, and Barnhouse.¹⁸

In Neolithic Orkney, decorated stonework was a common and integral feature of *both* domestic and funerary architecture. This challenges what has often been seen as an exclusive association between passage graves and art in the Neolithic and suggests that mark-making was a fundamental part of everyday experience.¹⁹ It was certainly widespread. Across Neolithic Europe, decorated sites all draw upon a similar repertoire of techniques and motifs, implying a common understanding of art and architecture. But what is striking is not necessarily their similarities, but rather their distinctive differences. Each site, whether in Brittany, Ireland, or Orkney, shows subtle, but significant variations; each has its own personality.

Defining the Ness of Brodgar’s assemblage

Between 2006 and 2013, 548 stones from the Ness of Brodgar were catalogued as having been deliberately or decoratively marked, *e.g.* incised, carved, cup-marked, pecked, pick-dressed, chiselled, or painted, and analysed as part of my PhD research.²⁰ This research was subsequently published and forms a key reference for this chapter.²¹ Between 2014 and 2019, a further 430 decorated stones have been recorded from the site, adding

to an overall assemblage that now numbers over 900 examples.²² The assemblage is overwhelmingly dominated by architectural stonework, although there is also a small number of decorated stone artefacts from the site.

The raw material – the *rock* – used in the buildings at the Ness of Brodgar is almost entirely sedimentary, being formed of the Old Red Sandstone which characterises Orkney’s solid geology (*Chapter 16*). This apparent homogeneity masks a considerable structural and aesthetic diversity. In Orkney, the *Old Red* is represented by Yesnaby Sandstone, Caithness Flagstone, and Eday Sandstone.²³ Between them, these formations are capable of producing stones with a huge range of different colours, textures and densities.²⁴ The majority of the stone used in the Ness of Brodgar’s walls is what is generally known as flagstone: the term used colloquially and archaeologically to describe the horizontally bedded mudstones, siltstones and sandstones which are easily quarried and broken into flat slabs and building stones. Coarser grained red and yellow Eday bed sandstones are also used, but sparingly and thoughtfully. These coloured stones generally appear to have been placed for effect in specific contexts such as at the ends of piers, in door jambs, and as internal furniture such as dressers.

The use of colour certainly seems to have been important. This is also seen in the use of pigment on the site, which appears to have been exploited – uniquely in a British Neolithic context – to decorate the internal walls of buildings. In Structure 8, one stone in the main wall had circular designs in red, black and yellow, whilst other stones have also been found with chevrons and arcs in the bright reds and oranges formed by iron-based pigments. The likely source for these was the island of Hoy, whose high hills dominate the southern skyline from the site.²⁵ To date, approximately 30 stones with possible painted decoration have also been found at the Ness of Brodgar. These are currently in storage for conservation and are not discussed here.

This sophisticated use of pigments highlights the deep knowledge that Neolithic Orcadians had of the properties of different minerals and rocks. This is also seen in the way that the distinctive qualities of mudstones, siltstones and sandstones are manipulated in the site’s buildings. All the examples considered here involve marks made on stone, but for many of the pieces under discussion, that is where the similarity ends. At the Ness of Brodgar, incising, carving, pecking, pick-dressing, chiselling, drilling and grinding are all used to decorate,



11.4 SFI6258 (detail) © Antonia Thomas

dress, or make deliberate marks on the buildings' stones. In some cases, this takes the form of little more than a crude, but focussed and deliberate peckmark, or a hastily scratched series of lines. There is a certain correspondence between raw material and methods of working, with pecking, pick-dressing and cup-marking predominantly found on the coarser grained Eday sandstones, and laminar flagstones usually selected for incising and carving angular designs. Approximately 70% of the decorated stone assemblage is incised: carved using a sharp edge tool such as a flint flake, often only scratched into the surface but occasionally repeatedly carved to get a deep, v-profile groove in the stone. These types of intaglio markings are found throughout Britain and Ireland in Neolithic settings, but generally receive less attention than the more striking pecked designs which characterise Irish examples.

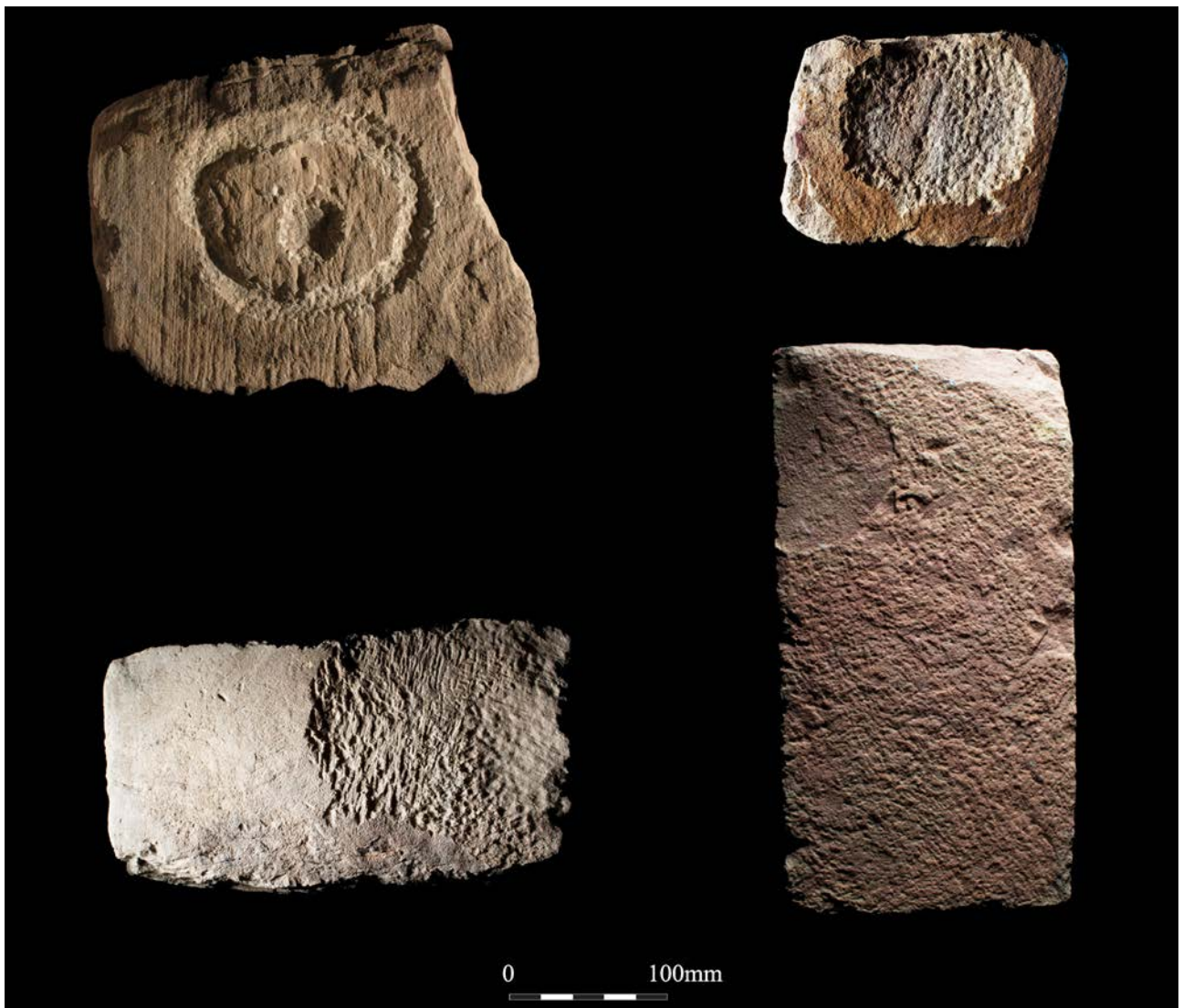
Pick-dressing – involving the repeated, percussive act of hitting the stone to create a uniformly pecked surface – is a particular feature at the Ness of Brodgar and appears in approximately 30% of the assemblage. It is a highly specialised process of stone decoration, which enhances the texture and colour of a stone and demonstrates a great interest in its surface qualities.²⁶ Exceptionally rare in Britain, outside of the Ness of Brodgar and Maeshowe it is only seen at Barclodiad y Gawres on Anglesey, and on the Stonehenge sarsens. It is a particular feature at the Boyne Valley tombs in Ireland, where it is found on accessible stonework and often overlies or obliterates earlier motifs.²⁷ At the Ness of Brodgar, it is concentrated in key areas such as thresholds and the ends of piers, and as noted at the Boyne Valley sites, is positioned to favour a person entering rather than exiting a space.²⁸

An elaborate variation on pick-dressing is *bas-relief* working, which can be seen on three stones from the Ness of Brodgar. Here, the dressing is controlled to create different depths of surface, forming patterns with an almost three-dimensional quality. It is not otherwise recorded outside of Ireland. At the other end of the scale, the texture and surface qualities of stone were regularly enhanced through polishing. This may have been used to prepare the stone for subsequent incising, an effect similar to that conjectured for the application of pigment.²⁹

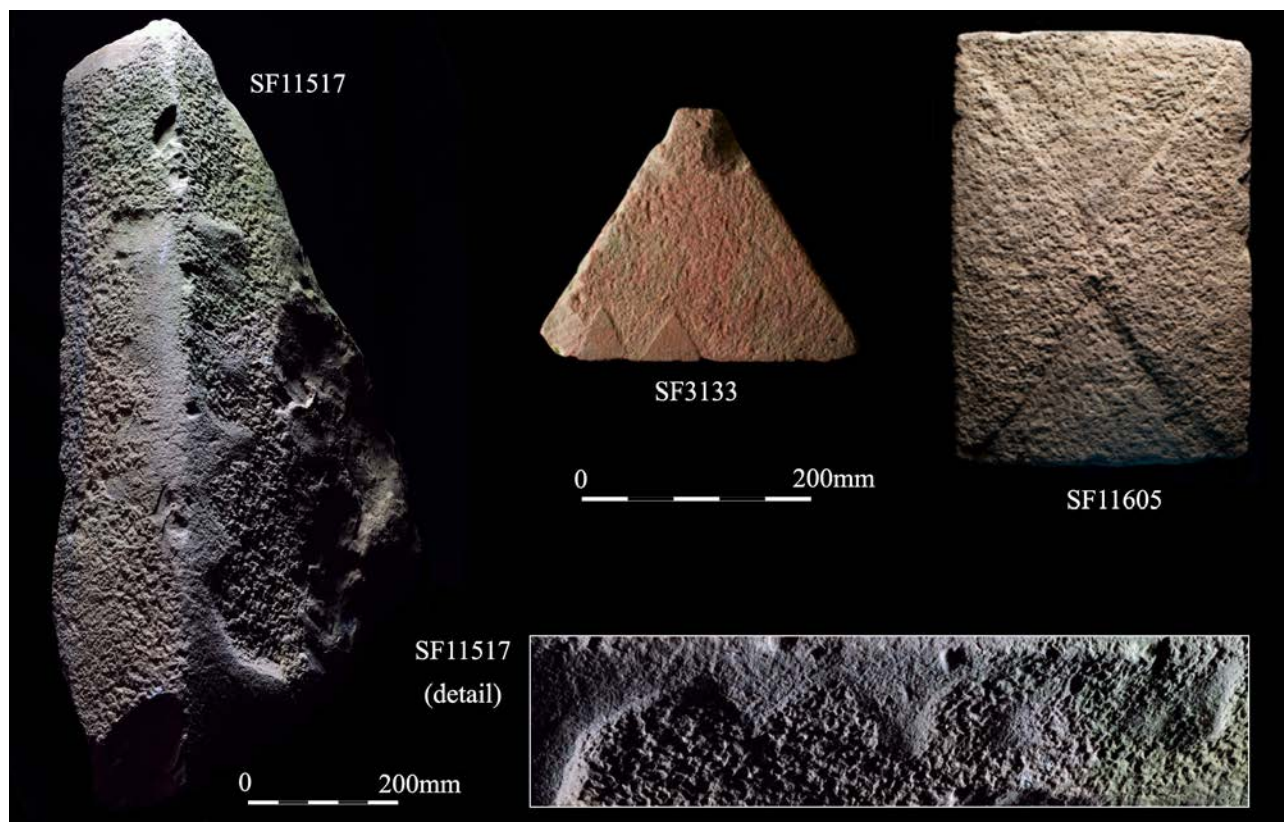
Cup-marks, otherwise a rare appearance in Orkney's Neolithic buildings, appear at different scales and

qualities of finish across the site. Across Neolithic Britain and Ireland, they are found in a range of contexts, and although more frequent in open-air rock art, they appear in architectural settings ranging in date from the early Neolithic to the Bronze Age. Often just a crudely pecked depression, these are occasionally then ground to make a smooth concavity. Smaller drilled cup-marks, of an average of 10 mm in diameter, also appear either singly or in clusters.

Six stones from the site have so far shown evidence of chiselling, a form of indirect percussion where a flint blade is held obliquely from the stone's surface and driven down by the force of a stone or antler hammer



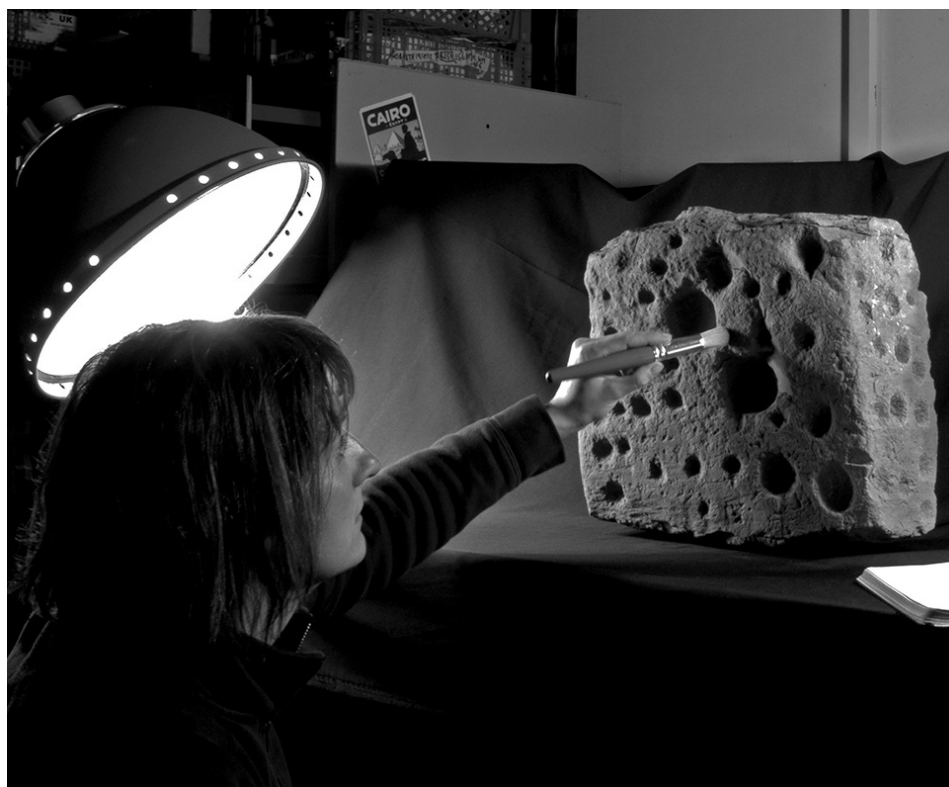
11.5 Examples of pick-dressing, chiselling and focussed pecking from the site. From top left: SF3133, a unique example of pecked 'cup-and-ring' decoration; SF16138, confined area pecking to form a circular design; SF8698, pick-dressed red sandstone which originally formed the central pillar for the dresser in Structure 10; and SF11187, sandstone with chiselled working overlying pick-dressing ©Antonia Thomas



11.6 Examples of bas-relief stone working ©Antonia Thomas

to produce characteristic angular scars.³⁰ This technique is virtually unknown in the context of Neolithic Britain and Ireland apart from at Maeshowe.³¹ It is striking therefore, that five of the six examples from the Ness of Brodgar, were found *in situ* in Structure 12, where the use of creamy yellow sandstone and the quality and dressing of the stonework, also matches only that seen in Maeshowe, 1500 m to the east.

The Ness of Brodgar’s buildings are not passage graves. Nor are they houses, in the usual domestic sense or as seen at sites such as the Links of Noltland or Skara Brae.



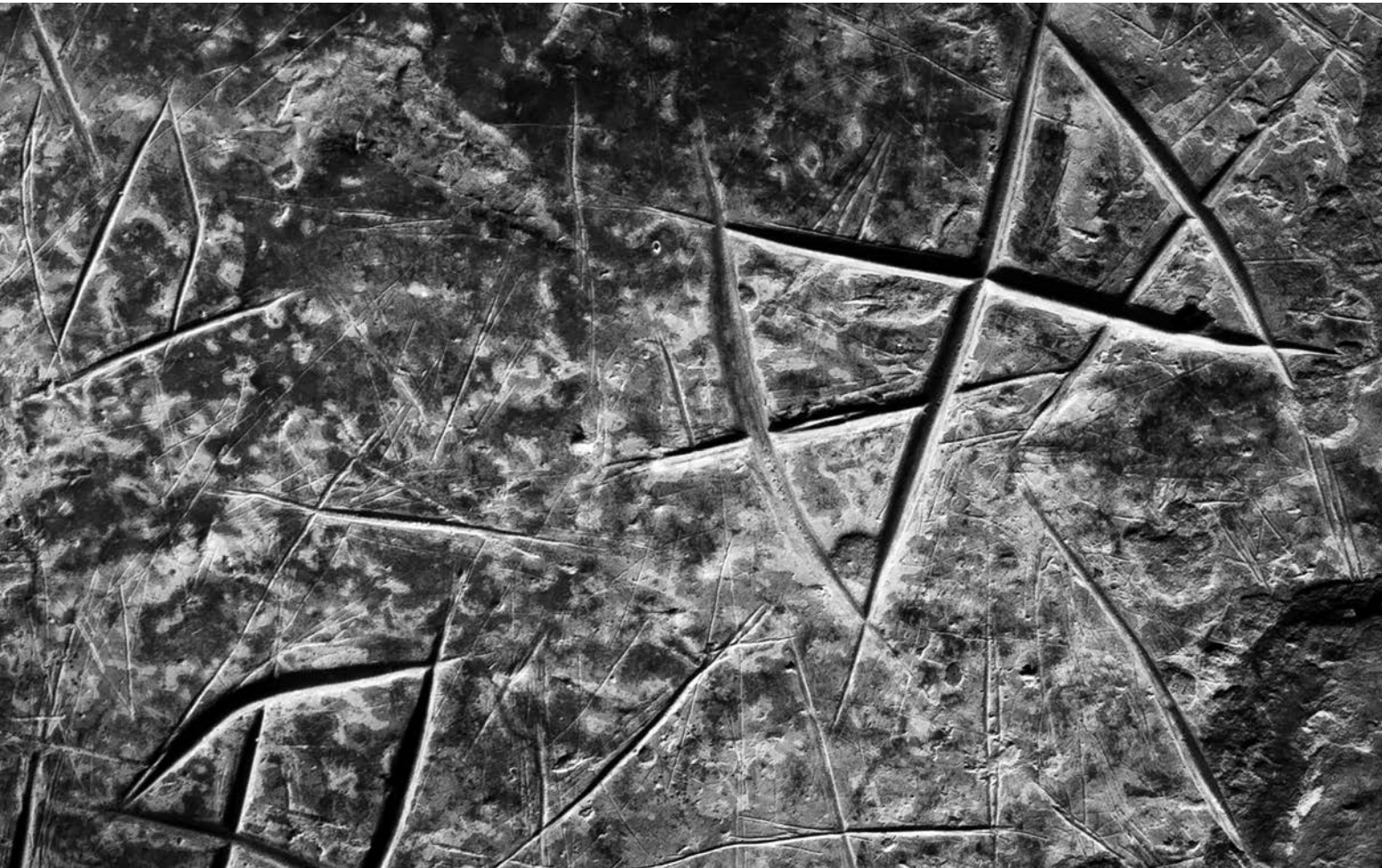
11.7 Cleaning and recording SF7530 during analysis ©Antonia Thomas

They combine elements of funerary and domestic architecture, defying our usual expectations regarding categories of monument. The way that stone was quarried, constructed, dressed, and decorated at the Ness of Brodgar compares to the finest buildings known from Neolithic Europe. The diversity of stoneworking practices at the site reflects this importance. It demonstrates a rich understanding of the properties, affordances and potentials of different types of stone, and demands a consideration of the wider associations of mark-making and stoneworking in the Neolithic.³² It is interesting to consider therefore, that many of the patterns found in the carvings at the Ness of Brodgar are remarkably similar to the naturally occurring patterns seen in Orkney's bedrock; patterns which would have been seen each time stone was quarried, worked and assembled. Lekky Shepherd has noted a visual correspondence between the carvings found at Skara Brae and the fissures in the bedrock close to the site.³³ It is possible that this correspondence was deliberate and rooted in practice of working stone itself, from extraction to decoration.

Motifs and meaning

Although sharing many aspects of decoration with other British and Irish Neolithic sites, the Ness of Brodgar has several defining characteristics. Curvilinear designs are rare, with only a small number of pecked horned spirals and meandering designs appearing. Angular motifs, particularly chevrons, lozenges, zigzags and parallel vertical lines dominate. Banded designs, like the Brodgar Stone, are an unusual but distinctive occurrence; these have motifs contained within parallel lines, typically along the long edge of a stone.³⁴ Discrete motifs, such as the opposed fan or 'Brodgar butterfly', occasionally make an appearance, with this particular example only found at the Ness of Brodgar. So how can we interpret these motifs? What do they *mean*?

My focus in this chapter is on architectural decoration. But there are also non-architectural stones which bear comparable decoration, and which are included in my assemblage. Several stone artefacts, such as knives and



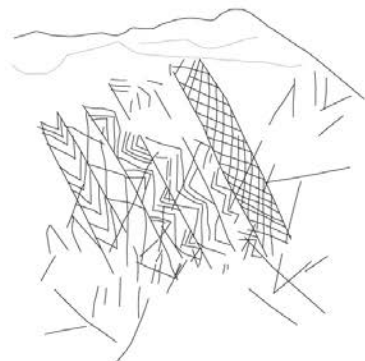
11.8 Detail of incised and carved decoration on SF16190. Note the different layers of superimposed incised and carved lines © Antonia Thomas



SF23270



SF16570 (detail)



SF12307 (detail)



SF17458



SF4698



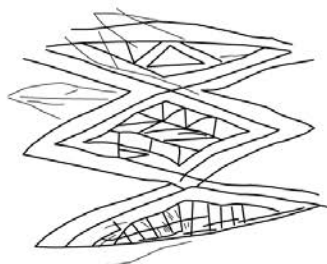
SF3606



SF2642 (detail)



SF3575



SF16258 (detail)



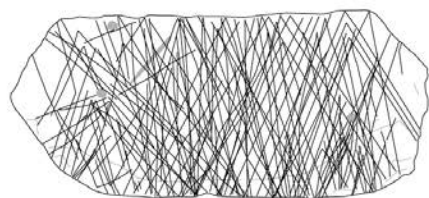
SF13618



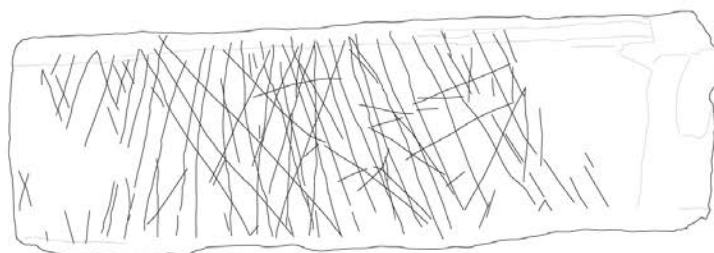
SF10720 (detail)



SF7330



SF13303



SF11519





11.10 Stone knife SF25579, a rare example of a tool with incised decoration from the site © Antonia Thomas

11.11 An example of 'natural rock art' from the site: SF18933. The saltire patterning is natural, but this feature was deliberately selected for its appearance © Antonia Thomas



flaked stone discs ('pot lids') have been found decorated in the same style with incised geometric motifs. These portable objects appear to demonstrate the importance of particular designs for personal, individual items as well as communal architecture. Indeed, at the Ness of Brodgar, and at other sites such as Skara Brae, the same repertoire of angular, geometric motifs appears on architectural stone, on Grooved Ware pottery, on worked bone, and on portable stone objects. Unworked stones, with natural features that superficially mimic these designs (such as fissures and bedding planes forming crosses and lozenges), also appear to have been deliberately incorporated into the buildings' walls, again suggesting an intersection of the human and the geological. These commonalities suggest a shared concern with the visual form of motifs selected for, and applied across, a range of media and settings.³⁵ Things, however, are not as straightforward as they first appear.

The intentions behind prehistoric motifs, and whether they are purely decorative ('art for art's sake') or have symbolic meaning, have been the subject of considerable archaeological debate. Some researchers have interpreted the motifs as representations of 'entoptic' images. These are visual sensations which originate from within the optic system, rather than from external stimuli and can be induced by a range of phenomena such as



trance and hallucinogenic drugs.³⁶ The visual forms or ‘phosphenes’ seen in these states include spirals, nested arcs, meandering lines, and zigzags – motifs that are frequently noted in Irish passage grave art. But at some tombs such as Knowth, these motifs only appear in later carvings, and were superimposed on quite different designs: they were not created until the tombs had already been in use for some time, raising questions about their visibility and audience.³⁷

Other interpretations have considered that abstract motifs may have functioned as some sort of language. Julian Thomas has discussed passage grave art in terms of a ‘language’ and ‘grammar’,³⁸ with others also describing Neolithic art as having its own ‘vocabulary’³⁹ and ‘metaphors’.⁴⁰ George Nash in particular has dismissed the view of ‘art for art’s sake’, preferring to see Neolithic designs as a language that can be ‘read’.⁴¹ These linguistic comparisons are problematic. The idea that Neolithic art is like a language rests upon several linked assumptions: that images (always) ‘mean’ something, that this meaning could be ‘deciphered’, and by extension, that modern archaeologists are able to translate this meaning.⁴²

On the surface, these interpretations seem attractive. But they all fall back on the idea that Neolithic art represents “something, anything...”⁴³ And on closer investigation, none of them quite ‘fit’. At the Ness of Brodgar, many of the stones have several motifs (zigzags, chevrons, nets *etc.*) all appearing together, and on top of one another, making the identification and interpretation of individual motifs arbitrary and meaningless. And if we think about our own lives, decoration and mark-making can have a wide range of intentions and meanings. From tattoos to masons’ marks, stenography to street art, and from cartography to the first marks made by toddlers, human communication and perception involves a bewildering array of images, symbols, and marks. To try and interpret all of these under one blanket definition is unhelpful. We need to look at these marks *in context*. We need to understand how and when they were made, where they were placed, and who they might have been seen by. Even in societies (such as the Yolngu and Walbiri Aborigines of Australia, or the Abelam of New Guinea) where art can be considered to have language-like qualities, its meaning is always context-specific.⁴⁴ Understanding the carvings at the Ness of Brodgar requires a correspondingly nuanced, contextual approach. It also demands an understanding of the relationship between image, process, and time.

Image, process, and time

Look at the image of SF8036 (*Fig. 11.13*). It is one of many stones (including the Brodgar Stone) which show several stages of decoration, with incising, carving, and discrete pecking all layered on top of one another. Its appearance is not the result of one form of attention, but many; it was worked, and reworked. This is a simple observation, but one that nonetheless has considerable repercussions.

In my analysis of the decorated stones from the Ness of Brodgar, I have found that nearly a third of them, like SF8036, exhibit several techniques, and stages of working. Designs frequently combine successive processes, with incised lines overlain by further carving, pick-dressing or cup-marks. In many cases, subsequent working partly obscures or obliterates earlier designs.⁴⁵ Similar sequences of attention have been identified in the Boyne Valley tombs, with incised angular motifs frequently the earliest phase.⁴⁶ This has serious implications for how we think of the carvings as art, with all the expectations of visual consumption that the term implies. After all, if a design can be altered or augmented, it indicates that any ‘meaning’ which lies behind the decoration is not fixed, but changes with time and context.⁴⁷ This suggests that approaches which focus purely on trying to ‘read’ the motifs, or focusing merely on static aspects of the carvings’ appearance – the way they look at one point in time – might well be misleading, when they might all be ‘unfinished business’.⁴⁸

I have long been fascinated by this paradox. Why were these stones worked, decorated, and experienced? Why were they repeatedly returned to and reworked? What does this tell us about the people who did this? And what does it tell us about humans and mark-making more generally? In trying to answer these questions, my work has taken a process-led approach. This has, to a large extent, been influenced by my engagement with contemporary art practice which has often also focussed on mark-making and process.⁴⁹ In visual art, Process Art refers to one of several post-minimalist movements that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, and which emphasises the process of conceiving, working out, making and placement of art. It considers this process, and related notions of time, gesture, and materiality to be as significant, or even take precedence over the finished object or product. The sensory experience of, and human interaction with, the work is prioritised, and its context is fundamental.⁵⁰

(*opposite*) 11.12 A confusion of overlaid lines makes the identification and interpretation of individual motifs impossible, and meaningless. Note also the lamination of the stone surface © Antonia Thomas

By contrast, in most archaeological discussions of art and architecture, these qualities are frequently downplayed. Buildings are frequently discussed as fully formed, 'ready-made' spaces, overlooking the process by which they emerged through construction and dwelling.⁵¹ This situation is partly an artefact of how we encounter these sites, as static and inanimate, frozen at the time of their discovery and excavation. A single, fixed time in the life of the structure takes precedence over the longer and more complex biography and duration of the site. Architectural carvings (and indeed, other forms of decoration) are often similarly interpreted. Superficial visual qualities are prioritised over other sensory engagements, leaving little scope for exploring the process by which carvings were made, or the relationship between raw material and 'design'.⁵²

Several anthropological studies suggest other ways of thinking about Neolithic art and architecture. A useful analogy is offered by Maurice Bloch's oft-cited research on the highly decorative carvings on Malagasy wooden doorways.⁵³ He found that for the Zafiminy who created them, the *design* of the carvings does not strictly 'mean' anything, and their finished appearance of the carvings was relatively insignificant. Repeated

carving is seen as 'honouring the wood' and an embodiment of the maturation of people, marriage and the marital home.⁵⁴ In this case study, the process of creating the decoration was meaningful as part of a worldview rooted in practice, through continued building and carving.⁵⁵ The process of repeatedly carving, and contributing to carvings, invested them with a significance beyond their appearance at any given moment.⁵⁶ At both the Ness of Brodgar, and at many of the Irish passage graves, carved decoration appears to show *several phases* of inscription and superimposition.⁵⁷ Bloch's study therefore provides a useful analogy for thinking about process and time in relation to Neolithic stone-carving and decoration.⁵⁸

A process-led approach also allows an exploration of the non-visual qualities of stone working.⁵⁹ Ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa⁶⁰ and Micronesia⁶¹ has investigated the auditory, olfactory and haptic sensations associated with rock art, and suggests that carvings may be only one product of a more complex social engagement with stone. Drawing upon ethnographic evidence in South India, Adam Brumm, Nicole Boivin and Richard Fullager go further, suggesting that the carvers of Neolithic engraved stones in the same region



11.13 SF8036 (detail). Note the different phases of working – incising, carving, pecking – visible on the surface © Antonia Thomas



11.14 Perhaps the act of carving was more significant than the final form of the decoration? Chris Gee creating replica rock art © Antonia Thomas

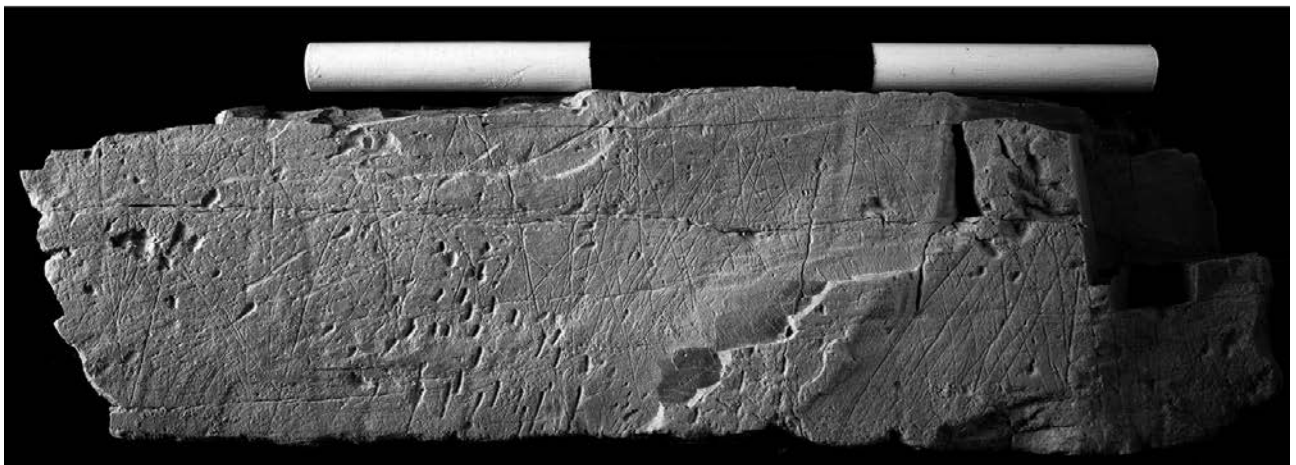
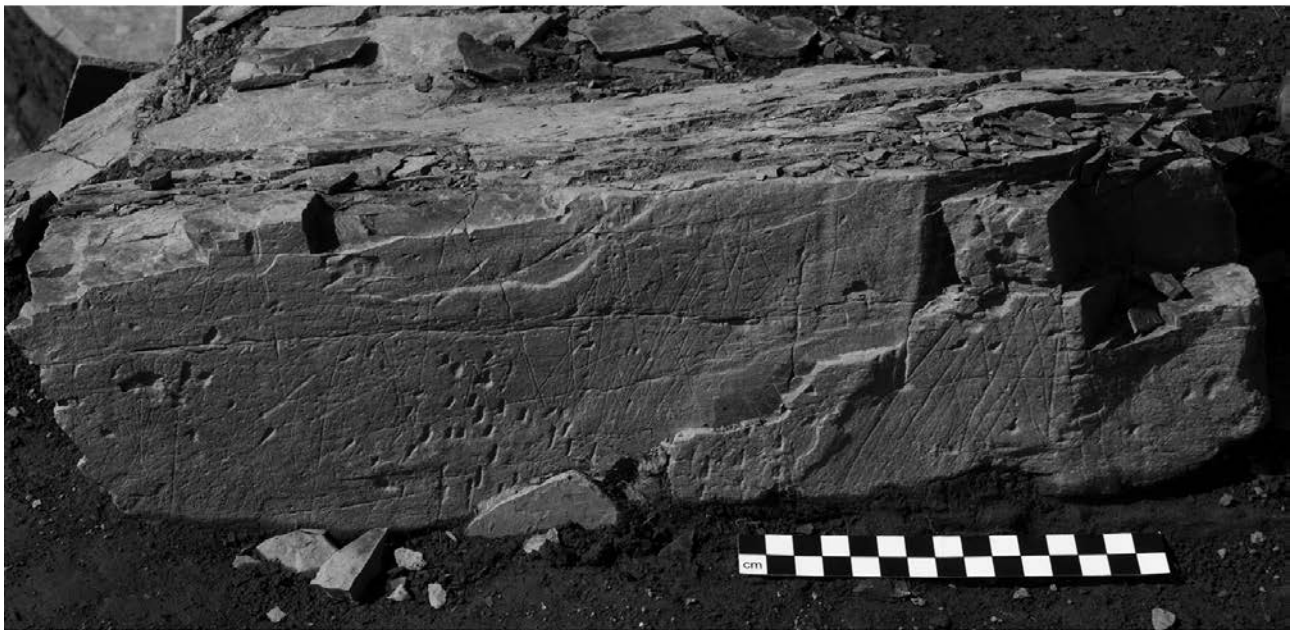
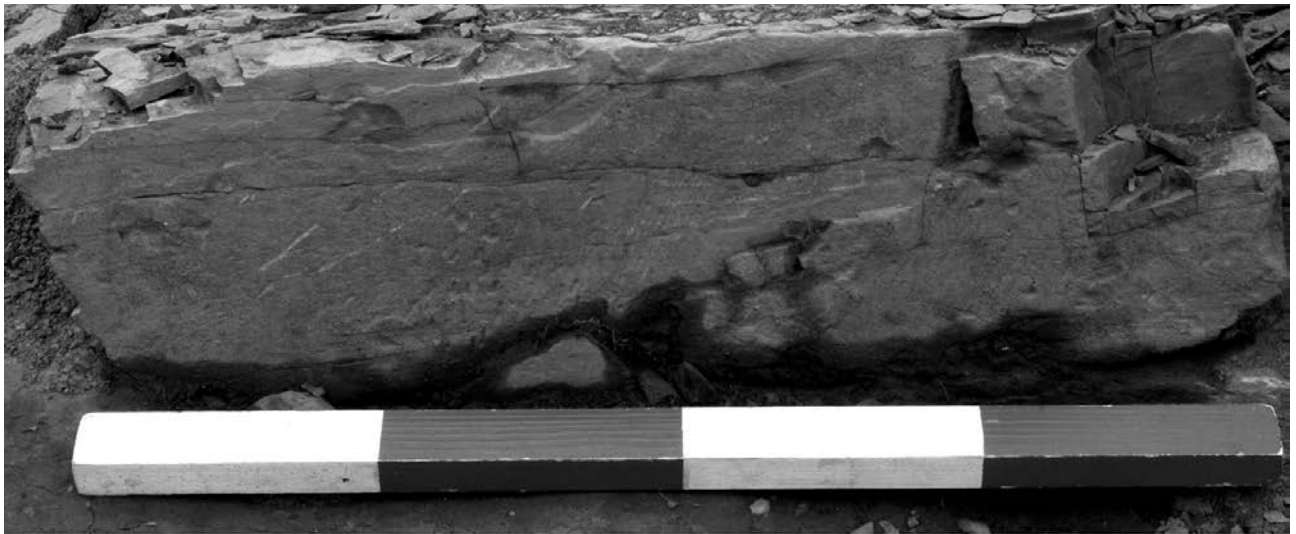
were responding to a 'life-force' within the stones themselves.⁶² Rather than being a passive entity, their research has shown that stones themselves may be both animate and animated through carving.⁶³

These examples offer many insights for thinking about the decorated stone from the Ness of Brodgar. In relation to this assemblage, a process-led approach can be useful in several ways. It allows an exploration of the range of different engagements with stone that happened from quarrying to carving and beyond. It allows a discussion of the way that time and context are important elements of experiencing the carvings. Significantly, it also allows an engagement with the process of recording these phenomena in the present.⁶⁴

Visibility and audience

At the Ness of Brodgar, decorated and dressed stone appears in demolition debris and occupation layers, *in situ* walling and foundation deposits. Whilst many of the dressed and cup-marked stones appear to have been placed for maximum visibility, such as entrances

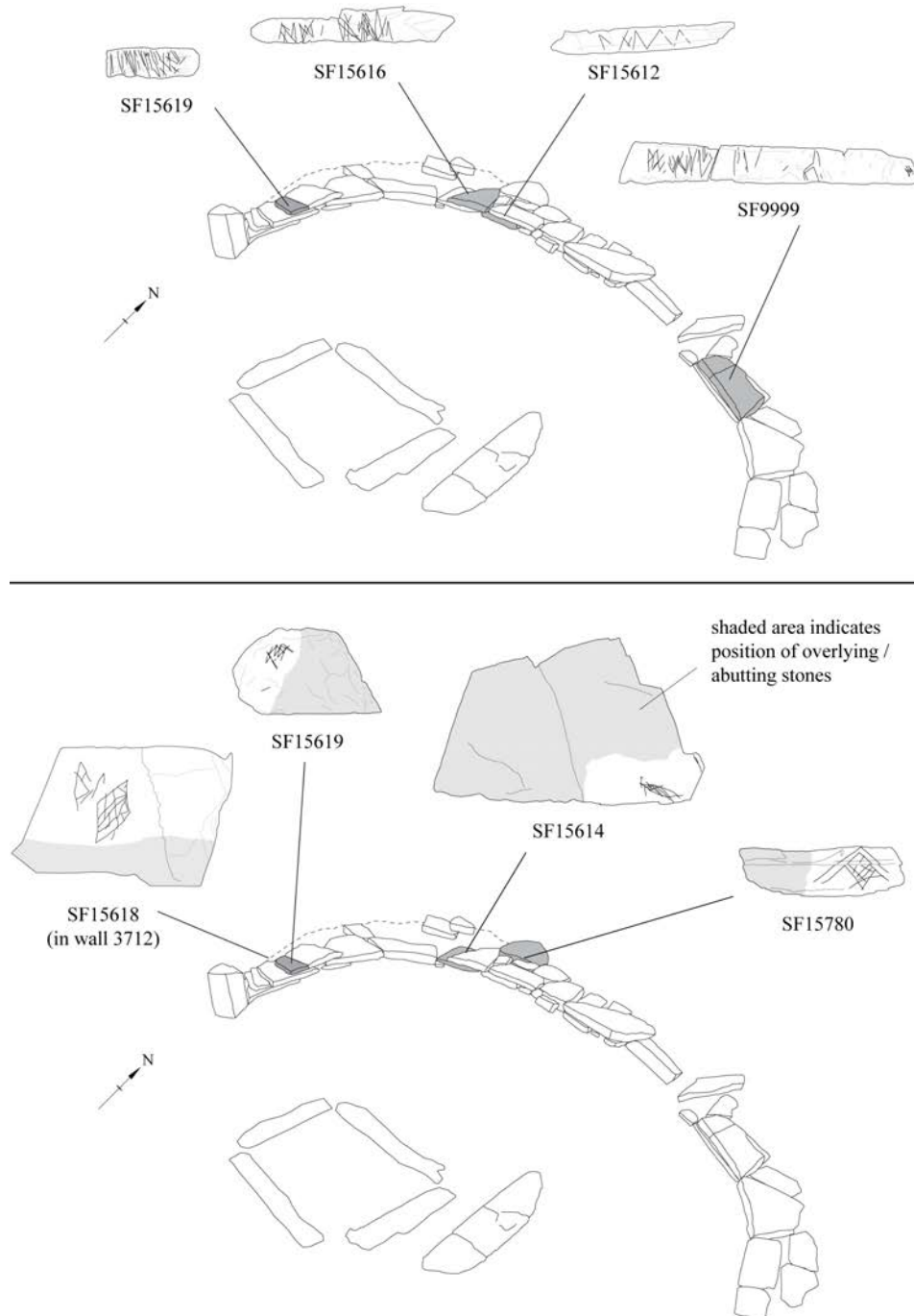
and the ends of piers, or internal furniture such as dressers, the positioning of many incised markings is rather different. Across the site, these are frequently found at floor level, in tight corners or other awkward locations in the buildings, where their appreciation and visibility are restricted. A similar occurrence has been observed at passage graves, where decoration of all types tends to be positioned where it would have been least illuminated by natural sunlight.⁶⁵ In many of the Irish tombs, the stones with the most complex designs are frequently situated in the deepest areas of the tombs.⁶⁶ George Nash has suggested that this dictated the need for artificial lighting, lending decorated surfaces a flickering, animate quality.⁶⁷ This suggests a temporality to the experience of the carvings, an aspect highlighted by the different phases of attention seen in many of the stones at the Ness of Brodgar.⁶⁸ A similar observation can be made in relation to the way that sunlight interacted with the carvings at the Ness of Brodgar. On several occasions, during fieldwork, the movement of the sun throughout the day would cause entire walls to become suddenly illuminated. Panels of previously unseen carvings would literally come to light, often before passing very quickly into shadow and becoming invisible again.⁶⁹



11.15 The play of light and shadow: SF11520 in different light (top: in overcast conditions, middle: with raking late afternoon sunlight, and bottom: in the studio) ©Antonia Thomas

Several other factors indicate that visibility was not a primary characteristic for all of the decorated stones on the site. Even where incised stones are 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 with RTI or controlled raking light photography.⁷⁰ Even more paradoxically,

it is frequently the most extensively decorated stones which 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*. These examples suggest that the visual appreciation of these stones was not a consistent concern.⁷¹



One other phenomenon in particular suggests that we should look beyond the superficial aspects of the decoration. 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, where approximately a third of the decorated stones had hidden marks. 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 visible during the occupation of the building tended to be extensively incised all along their edges. There is an absence of discrete motifs, 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

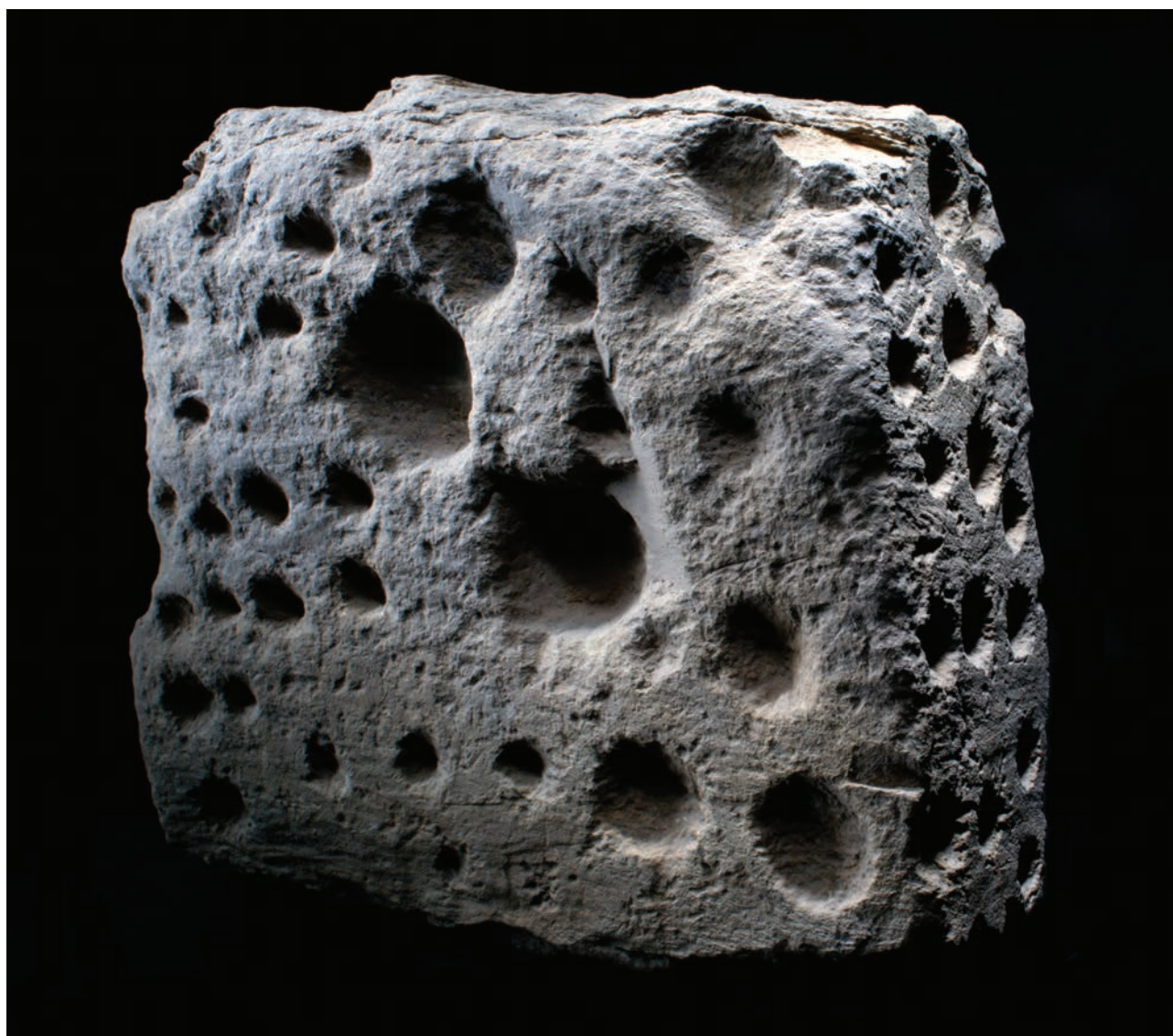
11.16 Decorated stones in Structure 7. (Top) Visible, and (bottom) hidden, decorated stones within the main walling
© Antonia Thomas

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. 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 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. 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.⁷² This suggests that both the placement of these stones, and the concealment

of their carvings, was considered and significant. These observations suggest that the diversity of types, contexts, and visibility seen in the carvings at the Ness of Brodgar is not accidental. The variety seen in the assemblage, and the manner in which different stones were placed on the site, was deliberate and meaningful.

Conclusion: process, temporality, and context

Since 2006, over 900 individual decorated and dressed stones have been recorded from the Ness of Brodgar. This represents the largest Neolithic assemblage of its kind in the UK and one of the largest in Europe. It



11.17 Cup-marked stone (SF7530) incorporated within secondary walling near the entrance to Structure 1 © Antonia Thomas

compares to passage grave art found in Ireland, particularly in the Boyne Valley sites, but it is a distinctive collection. The range of types of decoration and techniques of execution is unparalleled in Britain, including worked architectural stone and portable pieces with lightly incised 'scratch art' and deeply carved designs; ground, drilled and pecked cup-marks, pick-dressing and *bas-relief* working. These 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. Many of the incised motifs are similar to those found in other settings in Orkney. But the scale of the architecture, use of fine sandstones, and sophistication of the dressing, compares only to Maeshowe, one of the finest buildings known from Neolithic northwest Europe.

But it is the insights gained from excavation, that makes the Ness of Brodgar really exceptional. This affords a stratigraphic and chronological understanding of Neolithic decoration that is seldom possible. It has also allowed for the discovery of many stones with 'hidden' decoration, which were either placed as foundation deposits under the buildings, or within the fabric of the walls as they were being built. Although identified at other Neolithic architectural settings, such as at the great passage graves in the Boyne Valley and in Brittany, it is only at the Ness of Brodgar that we can truly start to understand the significance of these forms of 'hidden' decoration.

In this chapter, I have suggested that a process-led approach has a particular value, not least in the way that it allows a discussion of the fundamental aspects of time and duration as they relate to the inscribed stone from the site. The careful dismantling and deconstruction processes demanded by the fieldwork are crucial to this approach. They afford a rare glimpse into the reverse processes of assembly and construction, allowing us to examine stonework as it is being taken apart, and record it in detail. It means that we can move away from overarching and uncritical designations of art to consider the subtleties of mark-making. Of course, 'new' stones emerge with each season of fieldwork, as do new understandings and theories. Like many of the examples of decoration I have presented here, archaeological interpretations are never finished business; but are made to be worked and reworked. I hope this chapter allows a springboard for further discussion and debate, and a new way of thinking about these kinds of mark-making in Neolithic Orkney and beyond.

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Chapter 11

Art in context: The decorated stone assemblage

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- ## Chapter 12 Micromorphology
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Archaeological excavations at the Ness of Brodgar are adding a new thread to 'The Orkney Tapestry'. Set on a narrow isthmus between the Lochs of Stenness and Harray, this remarkable complex of stone buildings stands at the heart of an area long renowned for its Neolithic monuments. Drawing on evidence from more than a decade of fieldwork, this book explores the character, history and significance of the site, asking why it was that people over 5000 years ago came to create some of the most monumental stone buildings of their time.

Beautifully illustrated, *The Ness of Brodgar: As it Stands* provides a wealth of information about the buildings and artefacts found during excavation, from flint tools and pottery to polished stone axes and maceheads. The huge amount of carved stone artwork on the site is stunning and mysterious; so much more than mere decoration. Here we find the animals that were farmed and hunted, the fish that were caught and shellfish gathered, as well as the cultivated crops and wild plants that were used for food. But Orkney was not isolated in the Neolithic (a modern, city-centric concept) and the chapters gathered here trace the connections between these islands and what we now recognise as Britain, Ireland and continental Europe. I once told a journalist that the discoveries at the Ness of Brodgar meant we had to tear up books on the Neolithic and start again. This exquisite study of an ongoing project is an excellent first step in that direction.



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