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Walking in-between: Field walking in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage site buffer zone at Maeshowe and Brodgar.

Dan Lee

During 2016, the University of the Highlands and Islands Archaeology Institute worked in partnership with Orkney Archaeology Society to undertake an exciting new field walking project within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site Buffer Zone (HONO WHS), West Mainland, Orkney. The aim was to provide hands-on training and memorable experiences in field archaeology to the local volunteers using a field walking project in the iconic landscape of the Orkney's World Heritage Site at Maeshowe and Brodgar. By its very nature, field walking allows us to explore the spaces in the landscape between the well-known sites. This contributes additional layers of interpretation to this complex landscape which contains traces of inhabitation spanning the last 5000 or so years: some visible on the ground surface, others not.

The West Mainland landscape is no stranger to field walking. Indeed, field walking has proved highly successful in recent years in Orkney and resulted in the discovery and excavation of numerous significant sites, for example Barnhouse Neolithic Village located adjacent to the Standing Stones of Stenness. Field walking, defined as the surface collection of spatially mapped material from ploughed fields, provides an excellent vehicle for engaging local volunteers with archaeology, whilst also contributing significant research to the World Heritage Site and our understanding of the landscape.

The recent completion of the World Heritage Area geophysics project (ORCA Geophysics) has revealed a complex multi-period landscape, comprising sites and features from prehistory to more recent strip cultivation patterns hidden below the ground surface. Geophysics has enhanced our knowledge of the main World Heritage sites and contributed newly discovered sites to the story. Field walking provides the opportunity to collect material associated with sites identified in the geophysics, and perhaps help date them, and explore new areas. One of the key aims of the field walking project was to collect material from all periods and adopt a multi-temporal approach. Through this, a more detailed understanding of how the World Heritage Site landscape developed through time can be assembled, and explore how the landscape was used and inhabited up to the present day.

Designed around a series of field-based activities and workshops, the project aimed to teach participants about the practice of archaeological field walking, finds and materials from all periods, the processes that occur after fieldwork and how to present the results in a public talk and final museum exhibition. Two weeks of field walking were spread throughout the spring of 2016 when ploughed fields were available to walk. The project attracted a lot of interest and up to a dozen field walkers attended each session, including a number of new faces to archaeology. Fields were walked on a 10m grid in order to sample surface finds and record them spatially. Lines were spaced 10m apart and marked with canes. Surface finds were collected and bagged at 10m intervals along each line. The bags were marked on the ground with a survey flag, all of which are surveyed at the end with an accurate Global positioning System (GPS) system (+/- 2cm).

Twenty fields were walked in total, with an additional six fields included in the post-fieldwork activities that were walked during the spring of 2015. The study area comprises the HONO WHS Brodgar / Maeshowe buffer zone (46km²), much of which is occupied by Stenness and Harray lochs, but includes large areas of arable farmland and the Brodgar peninsula. Much of the land around the Ring of Brodgar and Standing Stones of Stenness is under pasture, although the area around Maeshowe and most of the land around the loch are under arable cultivation and accessible to field walking.

A day workshop with Stenness Community School (Primary 4-7) was a real success, with the children enjoying the practical (walking part of a nearby field) and class-based work (cleaning, drawing, mapping finds). The class rated the day 10/10 and the class teacher commented that she “thought it was really valuable that the children understand that ‘history’ is right here, possibly even under our feet. It really brought home how an archaeological ‘discovery’ begins and that anyone can get involved.”



Polished axe found near Maeshowe in 2017

After the fieldwork, volunteers followed a series of lab-based workshops through the process of collating and interpreting the results. Finds cataloguing was the first important step in order to qualify and categorise the artefacts. All finds were recorded spatially which enabled the team to map the results in a workshop generating a Geographical Information System (GIS) for the project. This enabled us to visualise distributions and clusters of finds across the landscape. The flint and stone tools workshop demonstrated that a range of material had been collected from the Mesolithic period to the Bronze Age, including a number of diagnostic tools such as an Early Neolithic plano-convex knife. Additional workshops collated the results by field.

In total, nearly 2500 finds were recorded, with post-medieval / modern pottery being the largest category.

Four main clusters of fields were walked. Highlights from the results include the recovery of a polished stone axe Near Tormiston Farm in the Maeshowe area where, in fact, prehistoric material was generally low in frequency. Discrete lithic scatters were found near Deepdale, at the site of a suspected Neolithic settlement on the shore of the Loch of Stenness, and across the surrounding area. In general, the recovery of flint was consistent across the study area (1-5+ pieces per field) demonstrating evidence for prehistoric activity across the landscape. Prehistoric pottery was a notable absence from the assemblage. Discrete scatters of cramp (a vitrified slag-like material) were found at Ness Farm to the east of the Harray Loch. Cramp is usually associated with cremation burials and pyres and the material at Ness Farm could have been part of funerary activity perhaps associated with the large burial mound located nearby. Prehistoric finds including worked flint were found in the Maesquoy area of Harray.



Walking the WWII camp near Maeshowe

Highly varied concentrations of post-medieval and modern pottery were found throughout the study area. Localised patterns of pottery reflect manuring practices with household midden during the last few hundred years and are starting to give insights into the development of farmland and the cultivation of new areas. A significant modern assemblage from a WWII camp was recovered from a field adjacent to Maes Howe. This was home to the 9th Battalion Gordon Highlanders who moved to the Tormiston Camp in 1941. The camp housed several other light infantry regiments throughout the war. Finds include regimental crockery, buttons and a rifle practice round. It is rare that a WWII camp is subjected to both archaeological geophysics and fieldwalking.



Cataloguing the finds

The project culminated in a small temporary exhibition in Tankerness House Museum, in Kirkwall, where the story of the project and interim results were shared with the public. This was a fitting way to draw the project together at the end and set the team up well for giving a public

talk to Orkney Archaeology Society. The team have been field walking again during the spring of 2017, and with another 10 fields walked (funded by OAS and Historic Environment Scotland). A similar range of material has been recovered. These have focussed upon the clusters of fields at Maesquoy in Harray, where a blue glass bead of likely Iron Age date was found and the Maeshowe area where another polished stone axe has been recovered. Additional flint scatters have been found at Deepdale.

Overall, the project has contributed new knowledge to our understanding of the Orkney HONO WHS landscape, set the world heritage sites in a wider context, engaged new people in archaeology and trained them in key skills, and fostered an on-going field walking project in the World Heritage Area. Analysis of the results is ongoing, and it is hoped that the project will continue year on year. If you want to get involved in the project please email the UHI Archaeology Institute on studyarchaeology@uhi.ac.uk

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