

Neolithic carvings in Maes Howe

P J Ashmore*

ABSTRACT

A Neolithic date is argued for at least one of the carvings identified in the tomb in the 19th century, and more tentatively for others in the tomb.

In 1861 A W Gibb drew the runic and other carvings in Maes Howe following their discovery during J Farrer's excavations of that year (Farrer 1862, 14). Number 31 (illus 1) was on a plate captioned by Farrer (*ibid*, 40):

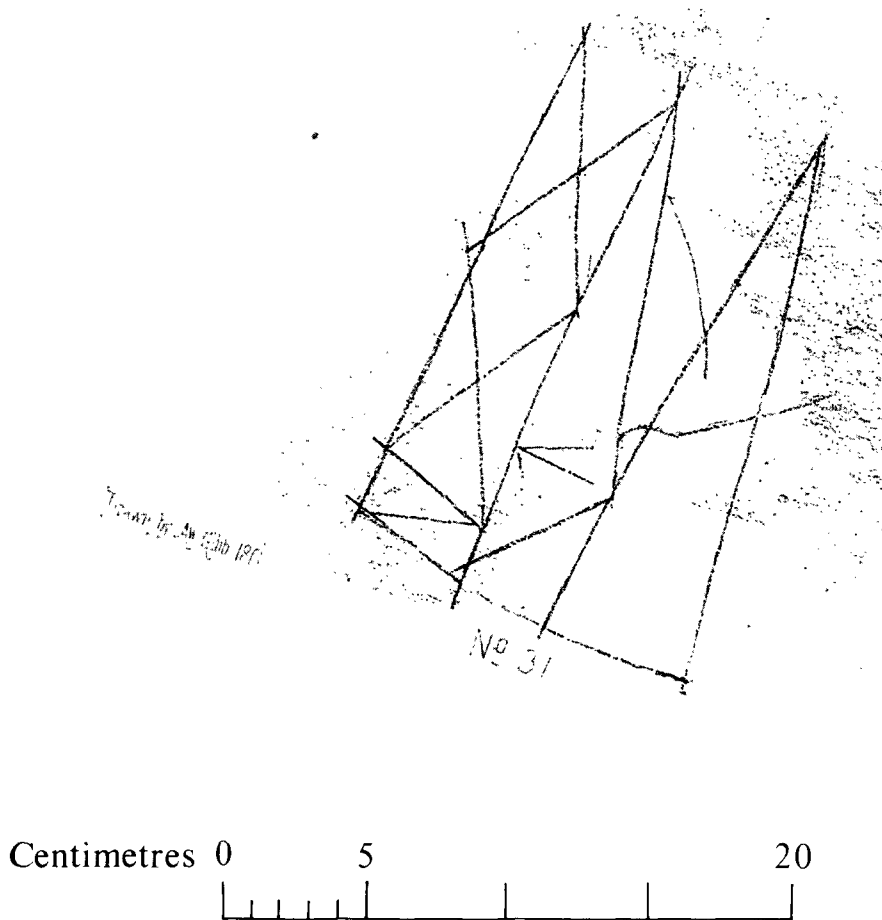
'The remaining Nos are considered by all the learned Professors as "scribbles" or scratches, and must be considered as unimportant',

although they include the lion and serpent knot. It is at the west side of the face of the smooth, massive, flagstone slab lining the north side of the south-west pier, 0·8 m above the present gravel floor. Examination of the other carvings drawn by Gibb and illustrated by Farrer shows No 31 to be lighter than all the Norse carvings but the runic alphabet (Farrer 1862, No 5) and quite different from the other 'scribbles' in Maes Howe. There seems no reason to suppose it Viking: it has no parallel among known Norse carvings in Orkney.

The engraving is 0·19 m tall; its lines are 0·3 mm thick. It is drawn in a crabbed hand, as if the tool has been used with considerable pressure applied close to the slab (illus 2). Gibb's drawing of it errs in detail and in conveying an impression of fluidity. The carving has not been scratched lightly, but rather cut laboriously. It is the only potentially third-millennium bc engraving published in 1862. There are other, lesser carvings on the same slab, but their ascription to the third millennium rather than to a modern author is less demonstrable, as is that of simple carvings on other stones of the chamber (appendix 1). Meantime we may note a 72 mm tall inverted V, 43 mm across the base and delineated by two near-parallel lines between 3 and 5 mm apart, above Gibb's No 31, and a carved triangle and line overlaid by the Norse walrus on the south-eastern buttress (illus 3).

Number 31 is remarkably similar to part of a carving found in 1972 at Skara Brae (illus 4) on a stone reused as a building slab in a wall (Clarke 1976, 20, fig 9; Clarke *et al* 1985, 56, fig 3.18, 245). Childe had previously discovered some 55 other carvings at Skara Brae; he distinguished six classes of decorations ranging from the lightly scratched to the pecked; most carvings were engraved. Fourteen of these (numbers 2, 4, 17, 19, 22, 26, 31, 35, 39, 42, 44, 52 and 54) are similar to the possibly third-millennium bc carvings in Maes Howe but only number 42, from cell F, presents a striking likeness (Childe 1930, 181–5). These carvings are quite different in nature to those from Eday Manse, Pickaquooy and Pierowall (*ibid*, pl 24; Sharples 1984, 102–5), and different too from the carvings in Holm of Papa Westray South, all of which are pecked rather than engraved. They are, however,

*Historic Buildings and Monuments (SDD), 20 Brandon Street, Edinburgh



ILLUS 1 Reproduction of Farrer's No 31 printed here with the carving in true relation to vertical

paralleled on a portable object from Skaill near Skara Brae (Callander 1931, 97, fig 20) and on a slab found adjacent to presumably Bronze-Age cists near Stenness (Marwick 1926, 35, fig 1).

In Ireland incision is used in the third millennium bc both as a guide to the layout of pecked decoration and in its own right (Eogan 1984, 186-7; Shee Twohig 1981, 106). Incised decorations similar to those in Maes Howe are known from Loughcrew Cairn J and Cairn L (Shee Twohig 1981, figs 220, 228), Fourknocks L4 and R2 (*ibid*, fig 246) and from the kerb of a Bronze-Age cairn at Lyles Hill (*ibid*, fig 276). The engraving on Stone A at Knowth Site 4 is broadly comparable to Maes Howe Number 31, but at Knowth it appears to be a laying-out grid for a pecked lozenge pattern (Eogan 1984, 38-9, fig 62). Less similar, but still of the same nature, is the carving at Knowth Site 16 on a corbel directly over Stone 12 (*ibid*, 132, fig 68.4). It is of interest in this context because it comes from a mound which has been dated from a layer of charcoal in its make-up to 2449 ± 67 bc (BM 1078) (*ibid*, 125, 194). Further abroad, triangles and chevrons of the kind found in Maes Howe are not



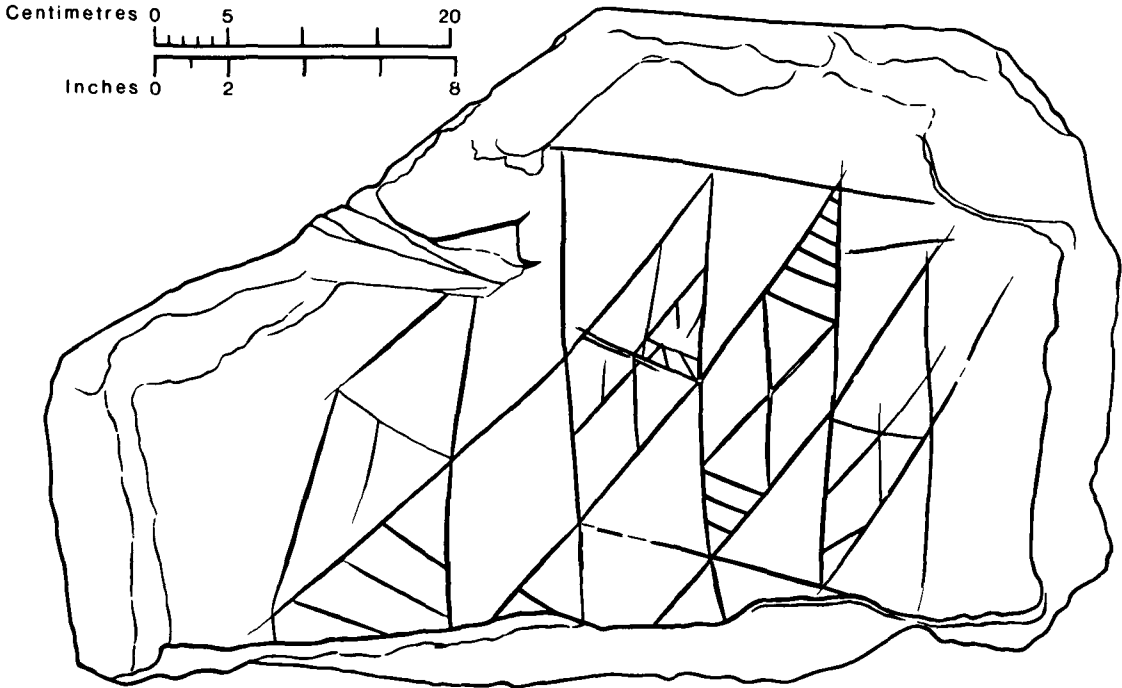
ILLUS 2 1985 photograph of carving No 31, scale 1:2.6. *Crown Copyright*

recorded from Neolithic tombs in Iberia, but broadly similar motifs occur on Petit Mont C8, and Crec'h Quille K5b in France (Shee Twohig 1981, figs 126, 160) and from Le Dehos in Guernsey (*ibid.*, 204). These latter comparisons, which ignore differences in carving technique, are most useful in reminding us that within the broad spectrum of European megalithic art simple motifs are bound on occasion to recur without the need for a direct connection; the Irish comparanda by way of contrast show that carvings like Farrer's No 31 are part of a wider milieu than Orkney.

In isolation Farrer's No 31 does not provide a conclusive link between the builders or users of Maes Howe and those of Skara Brae. It could have been made shortly before Maes Howe was built (it seems unlikely that this massive slab has been reused from an earlier structure), conceivably by a



ILLUS 3 1985 photograph of walrus carving with possibly Neolithic carving underneath. *Crown Copyright*



ILLUS 4 Reproduced from Clarke 1976, fig 9, a carving built into a wall at Skara Brae. *Crown Copyright*

quarryman unassociated with the builders except through trade or exchange. However, careful examination of the stones of the tomb at and below eyelevel shows that neither it nor any other possibly Neolithic carving is partially concealed by a stone and thus none can be shown to be earlier than the building. On the other hand, the non-runic carvings show no pattern of occurrence demanding that they were planned parts of the tomb, and none spans two stones. Thus none can be shown to be later than quarrying of the stones composing the tomb.

A possibility exists that Maes Howe Number 31 could have been engraved by someone other than the normal users of the tomb during its main period or subsequently in the Neolithic. Although the tomb was designed to be closed, the combination of door jambs at which the passage widens inward with a blocking stone pivoting from a special niche a little further up the passage suggests that people shut it from inside, presumably during rituals, not that it was closed up during its users' absence. There may therefore have been no physical barrier to casual or hostile entry.

However, we need not take the evidence of the carving in isolation. Henshall's argument that Maes Howe-type cairns relate culturally to Rinyo and Skara Brae (1963, 132–4) remains valid and indeed recent scrutiny of Childe's Quoyness notebook (preserved in the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments) suggests that the Grooved ware pottery found in his excavations at that related tomb was considerably more abundant than published sources have hitherto suggested. It seems from this most likely that any Neolithic carvings made by a member of the same cultural group as occupied Skara Brae would have been made during the building or primary use of the tomb.

The assignment of this long-known carving to a user or builder of the tomb strengthens our view of Maes Howe's date. Skara Brae appears to have been occupied from about 2500 to 2000 bc (Clarke

1976, 27), the date from Knowth Site 16 is comparable, and a similar date has been supposed for the building of Maes Howe (Renfrew 1979, 108–10, figs 54,55).

APPENDIX 1

SOME OF THE BETTER FORMED SCRATCHINGS AND CARVINGS ADDITIONAL TO THOSE (NOS 1–32) DRAWN BY GIBB IN 1861 (Numbers 33, 34, 36 and 37 may be Neolithic)

- 33 The partial circle and other scratchings on the north face of the south-western buttress, 0·8 m above the modern gravel floor (illus 2).
- 34 The chevron referred to in this article, on the north face of the south-western buttress 1·0 m above the floor.
- 35 A mason's mark of 1865, 0·56 m above the floor and 0·15 m south of the south-western buttress edge.
- 36 The triangle and line under the walrus on the south-eastern buttress edge (illus 3).
- 37 Miscellaneous scratchings 0·53 m north of the north face of the south-eastern buttress, 1·18 m above the gravel.
- 38 Miscellaneous scratchings on the south face of the eastern cell and 0·74 m above its floor, 0·63 m from the face of the east wall of the main chamber (seemingly fresher than No 31 and thus perhaps less ancient).

REFERENCES

- Callander, J G 1931 'Certain prehistoric relics from Orkney', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 65 (1930–1), 78–103.
- Childe, V G 1930 'Operations at Skara Brae during 1929', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 64 (1929–30), 158–91.
- Clarke, D V 1976 *The Neolithic village at Skara Brae, Orkney: 1972–3 excavations: an interim report*. Edinburgh.
- Clarke, D V, Cowie, T G & Foxon, A 1985 *Symbols of power at the time of Stonehenge*. Edinburgh.
- Eogan, G 1984 *Excavations at Knowth* (1). Dublin. (= *Roy Ir Acad Monogr in Archaeol*, 1.)
- Farrer, J 1862 *Notice of runic inscriptions discovered during recent excavations in the Orkneys*. Edinburgh.
- Henshall, Audrey S 1963 *The chambered tombs of Scotland*, 1. Edinburgh.
- Marwick, J G 1926 'Discovery of stone cists at Stenness, Orkney', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 60 (1925–6), 34–6.
- Renfrew, C 1979 *Investigations in Orkney*. London.
- Sharples, N M 1984 'Excavations at Pierowall Quarry, Westray, Orkney', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 114 (1984), 75–126, fiche 1: D1–fiche 2: G5.
- Shee Twohig, Elizabeth 1981 *The megalithic art of Western Europe*. Oxford.

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Historic Buildings and Monuments (SDD)