

Shorter Notes

The Island of Muckle Skerry, Orkney

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Muckle Skerry is the most northerly of the four islands in the Pentland Skerry group which lie between the N coast of Caithness and the island of South Ronaldsay, Orkney. The three other islands, Little Skerry, Louter Skerry and Clettack Skerry are small by comparison and are barely more than outcrops of the Rousay Flags which constitute the local geology. Muckle Skerry (ND 4678) has a surface area of approximately 0.5 sq km and is protected on all sides by steep cliffs and rock platforms which are exposed at low water. The island is almost plateau-like in appearance and the topography is uneventful with a difference of less than 15 m between the highest and lowest surface points. The surface is turf covered throughout and still supplies limited grazing facilities for sheep. As a result of strong tides and currents the Pentland Firth has been a notorious region for maritime disasters throughout history and a lighthouse was constructed on Muckle Skerry as early as 1794 (Wilson 1975, 4). The lighthouse system, now modernized and modified, stands within a complex of buildings and walled enclosures formerly used by the keepers and their families and dominates the island. The system is currently manned by a permanent staff of three.

Considering the difficulties of approach to Muckle Skerry even using modern vessels and aids, access in antiquity is likely to have been a formidable obstacle to any form of settlement or activity. Despite this however, survey work carried out by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAMS) and the Ordnance Survey had identified a number of sites which suggested that the island was unexpectedly rich in archaeological remains. A number of observations recorded by Mr A Black, a former lighthouse keeper and keen antiquarian, supported this view and a visit to the island by Dr Raymond Lamb, now Archaeological Officer for the Orkney Heritage Society, did much to confirm the wealth of the archaeological environment. The official survey visits had been of relatively short duration and in August 1981 a small expedition was mounted to carry out more detailed survey work and to investigate the possibility of additional monuments. A total of 30 monuments were subsequently identified (fig 1), approximately twice the number already known, and these are individually detailed in the index below.

It is difficult to ascribe many of these monuments to any specific phase of antiquity. The number of recorded chance finds are few and give little scope to interpret the breadth of chronology on the island. Published evidence shows only the discovery of fragments of an Early Iron Age pottery vessel (Longworth 1963) and the remains of a likely Viking Age bone comb with associated pottery (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 70 (1935-36), 393). In neither instance is the find spot on the island accurately defined. According to Black's observations (RCAMS 1946, ii, 365-6) midden material

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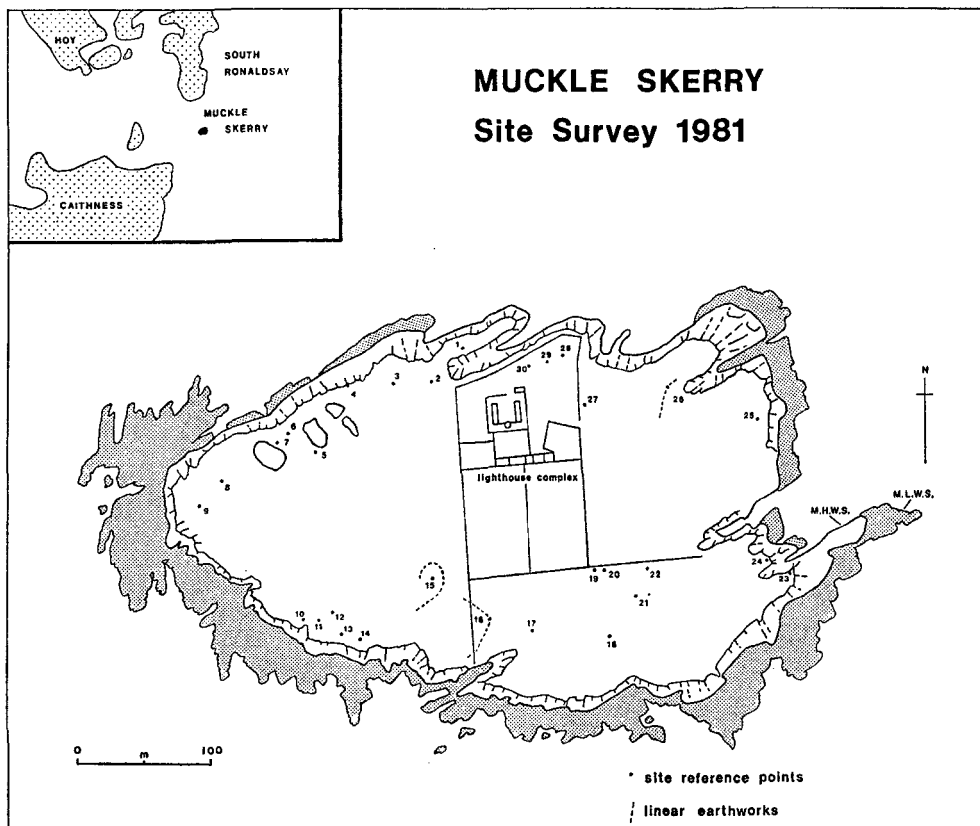


FIG 1

was encountered more frequently although detailed survey of the cliff section produced only one indisputable example. This lay along a 50 m eroded section of cliff face on the N side of the island (site 4) where shell midden and fallen stonework were clearly visible in the turf subsoil and where a modern drystone duck-hide had been superimposed over existing stone slab features. These were of unknown date but the extent of the deposits suggested an area of considerable settlement.

Many of the monuments investigated were in the form of mounds, and evidence of their function or type could rarely be determined even with a presence of stone features protruding through the turf. To some extent this problem had been alleviated by previous activity (or plunder) and several of the mounds had already been entered thus exposing internal features. Three of these showed the remains of slab-lined or walled cavities likely to represent burial areas. Those of site 3 and 25 were approximately 2.5 m × 2.0 m and 1.0 m × 0.5 m respectively while that of site 2 was somewhat larger being approximately 3 m × 3 m. Additionally this mound showed traces of two parallel lines of upright slabs set less than 1.0 m apart running southwards for at least 11.0 m. Of further interest was the presence of a number of partially visible uprights set in the area between sites 2 and 3. Only one of these exposed mounds showed any positive evidence of stone settings in the turf cover, site 25 exhibiting sub-rectangular alignments on the western face.

Six of the remaining undisturbed mounds also bore traces of protruding stones although it

was rarely possible to determine whether these were *in situ*, collapsed features or part of a cairn composition. Mound sites 6 and 7 both featured seemingly random stone settings although the latter contained a dominant upright slab approximately 60 cm high positioned roughly in the centre and close to a fallen slab of similar dimensions. Site 6 showed a noticeable depression at the summit. This was approximately 2.0 m in length with a small upright slab positioned at either end. A similar feature was observed on a further mound, site 5. Less definite features were discernible on site 14 although traces of a possible stone setting around the edge of the mound were noticed. The two other mounds in this group, sites 12 and 13, both showed slight traces of protruding slabs.

There is no reason to suggest that these monuments were anything other than burial mounds. Their apparent intact survival is likely to have been the result of their relatively low profile (between 0.5 and 1.0 m in height) and generally amorphous contours. They contrast sharply with the entered mounds which stand between 1.0 and 2.0 m high with more definite extremities and they take a more dominant (and attractive) position on the landscape. One monument likely to be an exception to this was a low, partly denuded mound (site 8) where removal of turf cover had revealed a small complex of upstanding slabs and stone features likely to represent some form of habitation. The features were concentrated in an area approximately 7 m × 7 m with a central space and a possible entrance to the NW. Animal action may have been partly responsible for the erosion of turf cover but it seems likely that the initial exposure was the result of excavation. Similar but less prolific stone features were also discovered to the SE of the island (site 23) protruding from the edges of a low, barely detectable mound. These consisted of two groups of upright slabs, the largest example being some 80 cm in length and 25 cm deep partially concealed in a small depression. The surrounding area contained a number of large slabs lying among the turf, several being over 1 m × 1 m in size. Additionally, the immediate vicinity revealed two upright slabs set approximately 2.5 m apart (site 24) similar to those encountered on sites 5 and 6.

Twelve further mounds produced little evidence for interpretation. Sites 10 and 11 probably belong to a specific group of burial mounds on the S of the island but the remainder are less easy to assign. Five of these (sites 9, 17, 18, 21 and 22) can be grouped together as being typologically similar being oval in form ranging in length between 16 and 28 m and in breadth between 9 and 16 m. In each case the highest point of the mound lay slightly towards one end of the long axis. There seemed to be no geological reason for their presence and indeed there was significant vegetational difference between the mound surface and the surrounding grassland. Two smaller mounds of similar proportion were also identified (sites 19 and 20).

The three remaining mound monuments lay to the N of the island adjacent to the lighthouse complex. Two of these were clearly visible from the ground (sites 29 and 30) and appear to have been utilised to house lighthouse equipment and facilities. The third (site 28) was identified from the lighthouse gallery by means of vegetational change.

Three linear earthworks were encountered during the survey. The least definable of these was a sub-circular enclosure, open to the W, with a diameter of approximately 35 m (site 15). The bank was between 3 and 4 m across, approximately 1 m in height and was vegetationally distinct from the surrounding area. Site 16 which appeared to have been eroded at the western side is likely to have represented a sub-rectangular earthwork roughly 65 m × 32 m with a possible internal platform approximately 1 m in height. A small curving bank approximately 30 cm high which had already been observed by Black lying to the NE of the lighthouse complex was interpreted as a field boundary (site 26). It was approximately 2.5 m in width and was visible for at least 55 m. Black interpreted the bank as being part of the circuit of a broch although there was no other

visible evidence as to why this suggestion should have been made. A length of rock-cut steps and drystone walling slightly to the E may have caused the confusion. These were interpreted as relating to earlier lighthouse activity.

The remaining two sites identified are possibly of ecclesiastical significance. Site 1, located on a narrow headland, was interpreted as being a roughly rectangular stone-built structure 13 m × 5 m in size with the long axis orientated E/W (fig 2). The tapering form of the structure appeared to have been a reflection of the only available flat ground surface. Probing suggested a stone flagged floor and there was also evidence of small upright facing slabs on the interior of the

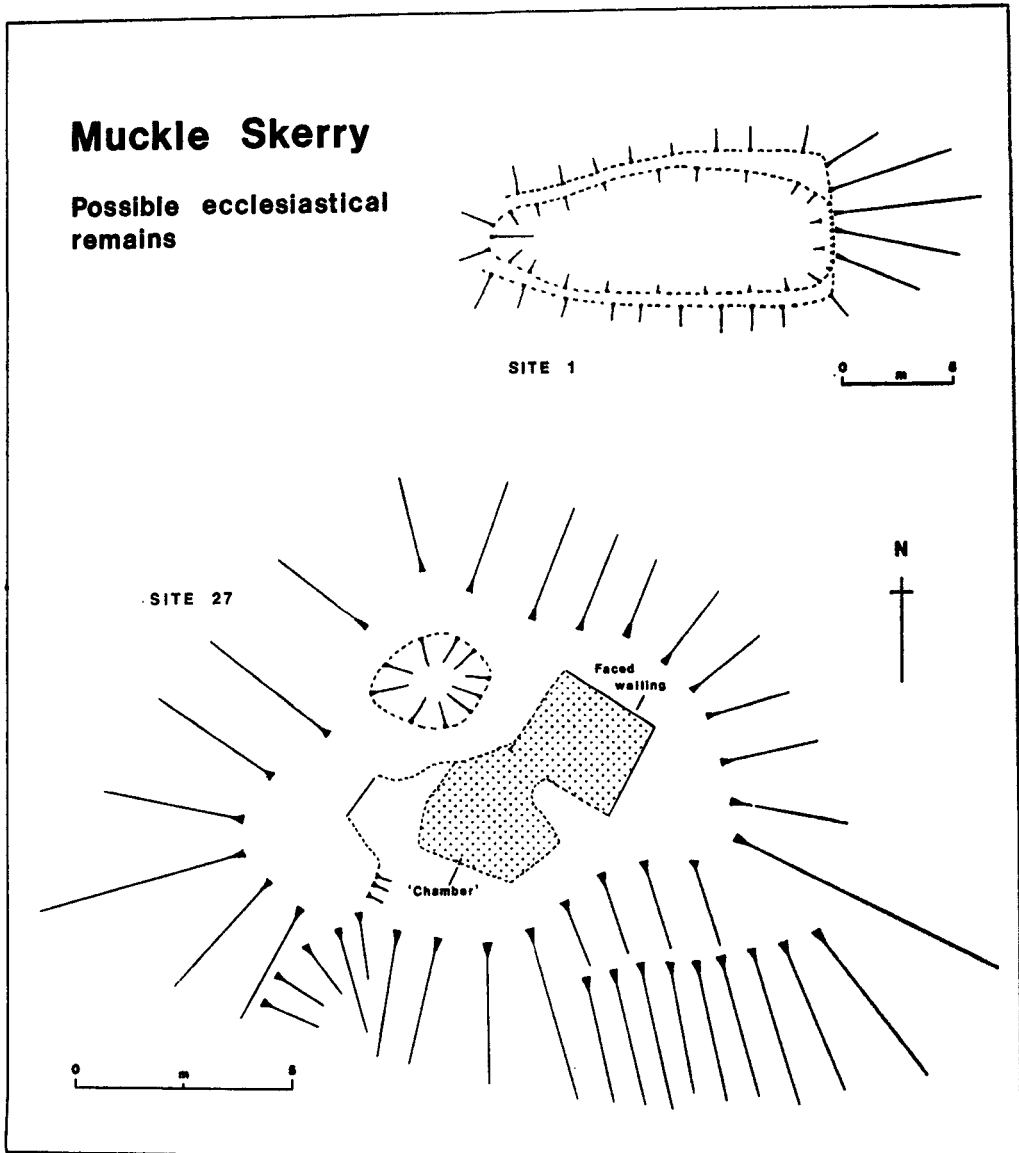


FIG 2

drystone walling. The entire structure was turf-covered. Both alignment and situation suggested an ecclesiastical structure, although the overall dimensions were not in its favour. The site appears to have been described as 'St Peter's Chapel' (Clouston 1918, 223) although the same name has also been applied to a different monument on the island (site 27) and considerable confusion has arisen. This site consisted of an opened mound approximately 25 m × 13 m which revealed two apparently conjoined internal 'chambers'. That to the W showed considerable collapse of stonework and an area some 4 m in diameter was suggested. To the E an area approximately 2.5 m × 2.5 m was visible with drystone walling standing to a height of almost 1.0 m (fig 2). General dilapidation prevented detailed analysis of the features although the interpretation of perhaps an oratory and living cell could be proposed. Approximately 13 m NE of the mound further stonework was discovered in the form of several upright slabs apparently leading towards the mound. These were similar to a feature observed adjacent to the site 2 burial mound discussed above. The possibility of a prehistoric monument reused in a later Christian capacity was therefore a possibility although proof of this might only be gained by excavation.

INDEX OF SITES

- §Site 1. (ND 46427849). Remains of sub-rectangular stone-built structure c 13 m × 5 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Probable flagged floor and drystone walls faced on inside with upright slabs. Turf covered with considerable tumble to S and E. Possible ecclesiastical structure. Fig 2. OAR no 496.
- Site 2. (ND 46387844). Mound c 15 m × 13 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height c 2 m. Entered from W exposing internal cavity c 3 m × 3 m formed by upright slabs and loose walling. Two lines of upright slabs c 1 m apart set c 11 m to S leading (?) to mound. Possible passage? OAR no 498.
- §Site 3. (ND 46337843). Mound c 12 m diameter. Height c 1.5 m. Entered at centre exposing sub-circular cavity c 2.5 m × 2.0 m formed by loose walling and large upright slab c 1.2 m long and 0.9 m deep to S. Further upright c 1.3 m long and 0.6 m deep aligned E/W near centre. OAR no 508.
- Site 4. (ND 46267843 midpoint). Eroded cliff section of length c 50 m revealing shell midden and fallen stonework within turf subsoil. Modern stone duck-hide superimposed on earlier stone features. Likely settlement area.
- Site 5. (ND 46227834). Mound c 10.5 m × 8.5 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height c 0.5 m. Two small facing uprights visible 2 m apart. Possible mound edge slabs evident. OAR no 502.
- §Site 6. (ND 46177837). Eroded mound with long axis c 11 m aligned E/W. Height c 0.5 m. Several fallen slabs apparent. Depression at summit c 2 m in length with small upright facing slab at either end. OAR no 509.
- §Site 7. (ND 46157835). Mound c 14 m × 11 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height c 0.8 m. Several thin uprights visible. Dominant upright set near centre c 0.6 m × 0.6 m aligned N/S with fallen stone of similar dimensions nearby. OAR no 509.
- §Site 8. (ND 46077830). Mound c 8 m diameter. Height less than 0.5 m. Entered at centre revealing complex of stone slab features particularly to N. Clear central area with possible entrance to NW. Domestic structure? OAR no 510.
- Site 9. (ND 46047825). Mound c 23 m × 13 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height c 1.0 m. Summit towards E.
- Site 10. (ND 46197809). Mound c 9 m × 6 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height less than c 0.5 m.
- Site 11. (ND 46227809). Mound c 9 m × 7 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height less than c 0.5 m.
- Site 12. (ND 46237810). Mound c 11 m diameter. Height less than c 0.5 m. One small protruding slab visible.
- Site 13. (ND 46257807). Mound c 11 m × 9 m. Long axis aligned N/S. Height c 1 m. At least four small protruding slabs visible.
- §Site 14. (ND 46287807). Mound c 18 m × 12 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height less than c 1 m. Several small protruding slabs visible. Evidence of possible edge slabs. OAR no 511.
- Site 15. (ND 46387815). Sub-circular earthwork of c 35 m diameter. Width of bank c 3–4 m and height c 1 m. Enclosure open to W. Significant vegetational difference from surrounding area.

- Site 16.* (ND 46477809). Sub-rectangular earthwork eroded to W. Estimated dimensions c 65 m × 32 m retaining internal platform less than c 1 m high.
- Site 17.* (ND 46547807). Mound c 24 m × 12 m. Long axis aligned NE/SW. Height c 1 m. Summit towards NE.
- Site 18.* (ND 46667807). Mound c 16 m × 9 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height c 1 m. Summit towards E.
- Site 19.* (ND 46637817). Mound c 10 m × 5 m. Long axis aligned NE/SW. Cut by wall. Height c 0.5 m.
- Site 20.* (ND 46647817). Mound c 4 m × 4 m. Cut by wall. Height less than c 0.5 m.
- Site 21.* (ND 46697813). Mound c 28 m × 16 m. Long axis aligned NE/SW. Height c 1 m. Summit towards SW.
- Site 22.* (ND 46717817). Mound c 28 m × 15 m. Long axis aligned NE/SW. Height c 1 m. Summit towards SW.
- §*Site 23.* (ND 46937815). Mound of amorphous form. Height less than c 0.5 m. Two groups of upright slabs visible. Largest slab c 0.9 m long and c 0.3 m deep partially concealed in depression. Area of large flat slabs the largest c 1 m × 1 m lying in vicinity. Probably settlement site. OAR no 499.
- Site 24.* (ND 46897818). Stone feature. Two facing slabs c 0.5 m × 0.5 m set 2 m apart on N/S axis. Slab to S fallen.
- Site 25.* (ND 46887839). Mound c 18 m × 12.5 m. Long axis aligned N/S. Height c 2 m. Entered at centre exposing irregularly formed stone-lined hollow c 1.0 m × 0.5 m and 0.4 m deep. Series of upright slabs visible on W side of mound set in sub-rectangular formations.
- §*Site 26.* (ND 46847843). Curving earthen bank c 0.3 m high and visible for c 55 m. Probable field boundary or dyke. OAR no 506.
- §*Site 27.* (ND 46627841). Mound c 25 m × 13 m. Long axis aligned NE/SW. Height c 2 m. Entered at centre exposing apparently two conjoined cells, one to the W diameter c 4 m showing collapsed stonework and one sub-rectangular to the E c 2.0 m × 2.5 m with evidence of drystone walling to depth of c 0.5 m. Upright slabs observed c 13 m to NE apparently leading to mound. Passage? Likely prehistoric monument reused to form possible ecclesiastical structure consisting of oratory(?) and cell(?). Fig 2. OAR no 497.
- Site 28.* (ND 46587848). Eroded mound visible only from lighthouse as result of vegetational change. Diameter c 10 m. Probably part of group with sites 29 and 30.
- Site 29.* (ND 46567847). Mound c 12 m × 10 m. Long axis aligned E/W. Height less than c 1 m. Slight depression in centre. Appears to have been utilized for lighthouse workings. OAR no 503.
- Site 30.* Mound c 13 m × 10 m. Long axis aligned NW/SE. Height less than c 1 m. Some stonework visible but presence of cement and modern features suggests reuse for lighthouse workings. OAR no 503.

§ Denotes site previously recorded by RCAMS.

Two small mounds recorded by the Ordnance Survey during their visit in 1973 at ND 46647821 (OAR no 501) and at ND 46877843 (OAR no 504) were not identified. Strangely, site 25 was recorded by neither body and there may be some possible confusion between this site and the latter of the two undiscovered Ordnance Survey sites above. Nevertheless it is curious that neither commented on the fact that the mound had been opened. This suggests that entry had taken place after 1973.

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OAR Orkney Archaeological Records. Maintained by the Orkney Heritage Society, 48 Junction Road, Kirkwall, Orkney.
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