

## A new Neolithic burial cairn in Orkney?

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### ABSTRACT

*During the excavation of a series of boat nousts at Hurnip's Point, Deerness, Orkney, in 1991 it was discovered that one of the nousts had been constructed against the side of an earlier cairn. Topographical and geophysical surveys were carried out and these showed the cairn to be tadpole-like in shape with a total length of some 60 m. Exploratory excavation at the 'tail' of the cairn suggested that the monument was probably a passage grave dating to the Neolithic period.*

### INTRODUCTION

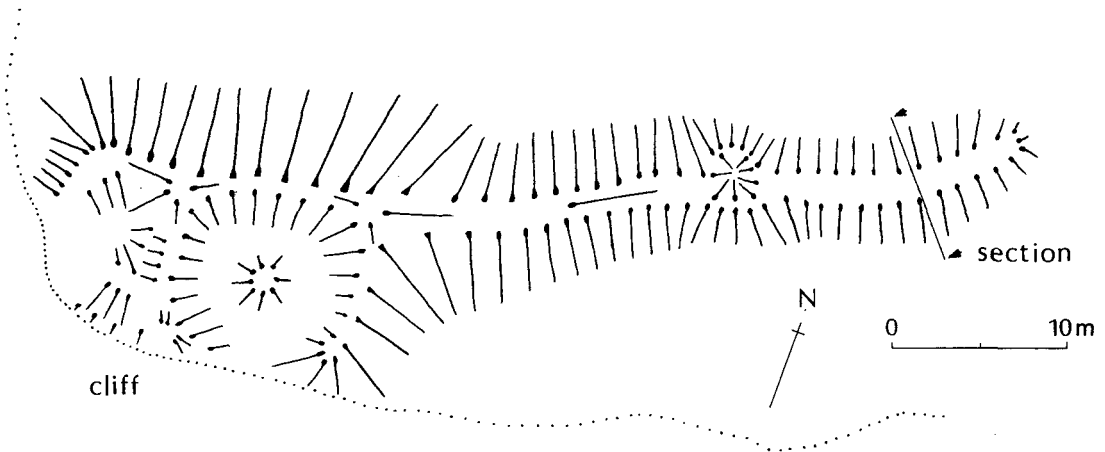
The headland of Hurnip's Point, Deerness, Orkney (HY 5440 0640), was investigated during the summer of 1991 with the intention of undertaking the survey and excavation of a series of four post-medieval boat nousts. The findings are discussed elsewhere together with the interpretation of an associated geophysical survey (Hunter 1992). During the investigation, however, it became clear that one of these nousts had been located against the side of an earlier monument from which stone had been taken for the noust construction. After preliminary investigation the monument was interpreted as a likely Neolithic burial cairn. This short note discusses the site and the argument that underlies the interpretation.

### SURVEY

Hurnip's Point is an uncultivated headland lying on the west side of the Deerness peninsula adjacent to the farm of Mirkady. The area covers approximately 5000 sq m and contains small patches of marshland. A discernible ridge at the south end, above a cliff face some 2 m high, dominates an otherwise low-lying and gently undulating topography based on a bedrock of Rousay Flags of the Middle Old Red Sandstone.

A topographical survey of the headland was carried out and the resulting contours were planned at intervals of 0.25 m. Features of probable archaeological significance were surveyed in greater detail and reproduced as hachure plans. These consisted of the four grass-covered nousts together with possible structural remains of linear type surmounting the natural ridge at the south part of the headland – the object of discussion here (illus 1). Geophysical survey was also undertaken using complementary resistivity and magnetic methods; the former showed this linear feature to be of high resistance indicative of a dense stone construction. High resistance readings were also observed for the stone walling of the nousts. Some magnetic enhancement of the feature was also evident.

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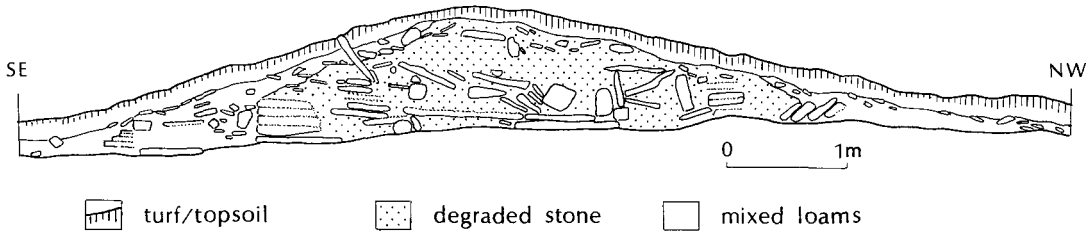
ILLUS 1 Hachure plan of Hurnip's Point monument

The feature itself was identified for a distance of approximately 60 m running from the headland at the west across to the fence line at the east where it appeared to terminate. Tadpole-like in shape, it consisted of a broad mound some 15 m wide at the west, narrowing down to barely 6 m wide against the fence, the last 30 m taking the form of a discernible 'tail'. This length appeared to be of relatively symmetrical profile with a height of approximately 1 m. A pit-like depression at one point suggested earlier excavation or intrusion. The wider western end was more undulating in character, but was also probably little more than 1 m above the interpreted natural ridge. Two shallow depressions, 10 m and 8 m in diameter respectively, at the south side, indicated that additional intrusion had occurred, possibly for the quarrying of material. This also gave the impression that the original height may have been substantially greater than at present. The occurrence of sporadic stones projecting through the turf on the wide part of the cairn and along the 'tail', suggested that it was almost certainly man-made.

### EXPLORATORY EXCAVATION

The discovery of this tadpole-like monument during the excavation of the adjacent noust posed certain problems of interpretation. Some 60 m in length and, with an underlying shape identifiable from the resistance survey, it appeared to represent some form of long cairn. Its interpretation as a burnt mound was discounted on the basis of the low magnetic response; nor could a broch or souterrain satisfactorily explain the structural method and shape. Turf clearance across a slit trench leading from the adjacent noust at the wider west end showed not only a cairn construction but also the likelihood of considerable robbing. However, the 'tail' at the east end seemed less eroded and it was felt justifiable to excavate a narrow trench in that quarter in an effort to understand more fully the nature and date of the monument without any unnecessary damage to its main body.

A trench measuring approximately  $9 \times 1$  m was positioned to transect the monument in order to provide a section across the 'tail'. This section (illus 2) showed the monument to be



ILLUS 2 Section through east end of 'tail' of cairn

formed of a collapsed passage or chamber some 2 m wide flanked by composite stone supports and with a maximum height of 0.9 m; the precise nature of the internal construction was obscured by collapse and by the decayed nature of the highly friable laminated stone used. The supports were each approximately 1 m wide and were constructed with a formal outer face composed of stacked slabs and a less formal inner face which may have been part-orthostat and which had supported a lintel. It is unclear whether a cavity originally existed between the two coursed facings on either side.

In the central area between the supports there was possible evidence of internal arrangements, but the degree of collapse and decay was such that it was almost impossible to identify individual features with any confidence. The illustrated section shows the general homogeneity of the decayed stone collapse; it emphasizes only those stones within the packed fill which could be defined with any certainty. The diagonal line of collapsed stone across the centre is assumed to be a fractured lintel. Apart from a small pocket of animal bones and shells which may have been the product of intrusive animal activity, no anthropogenic material was recovered. It is interesting to note that although the majority of the stone used in the construction was laminated and of a type available around the headland, a number of rounded boulders were also used. These were reddish in colour and geologically belong to the Eday Beds. Although present locally, these are not found in the immediate vicinity.

The outer faces of the structure were hidden by an additional layer of stone casing, again formally coursed with a gap of some 0.7 m between these and the respective outer faces of the supports on either side. This outer line at the north-west side had collapsed and the section was further obscured by decayed stone, but at the south-east side the coursing showed a stepped arrangement and the space between the inner and outer walling faces had been infilled. In places this infilling was tantamount to stacking, with the uppermost outer surface flagged smooth, giving an impressive convex external appearance.

The general character of construction, particularly the cased walling and the formal outer surface, together with the central passage, points towards a funeral monument, probably Neolithic – a date indirectly supported by the sherd of Neolithic pottery recovered from the adjacent noust construction. The sherd was coarse and undecorated but appeared to belong to a vessel of Grooved Ware form. However, the shape of the total feature – some 60 m in length – is less easy to reconcile with known Neolithic burial monuments in Orkney. It is, for example, considerably longer and less regular than the largest stalled cairns such as the Knowe of Ramsay, the Knowe of Rowiegar or Midhowe on Rousay. It may, however, shed some light on the longer, so-called horned cairns which best parallel its tadpole-like form. A smaller, but similarly shaped monument known as the Head of Work has a corresponding

landscape profile with a 'head and tail' shape (Davidson & Henshall 1989, pl 12); other, larger examples such as the Earl's Knoll on Stronsay (*ibid*, 115) or the Staney Hill example (*ibid*, 182) are more amorphously shaped but appear to reflect a similar constructional magnitude. There is virtually no recorded information on the architecture of these three and hence no indication as to their respective internal configurations.

The Hurnip's Point example lacks the 'horns' evident on the other three monuments, but these would have been the first elements to be lost to the sea. It seems unlikely that the lengthy 'tail' at Hurnip's Point or at any of the other monuments cited was merely a passage, and to some extent this is confirmed by the complexity of the section which suggests that this linear part of the monument may have been part of the overall chamber configuration. It is possible that monuments of this type (if indeed categorization is possible) may have been formed by a series of conjoined or discrete units, represented here by a sub-circular chamber at the west end and possibly by two longer chambers set in line at the east. Irrespective of the type of configuration, the Hurnip's Point example might now extend the distribution of Neolithic burial monuments into the otherwise barren east Mainland of Orkney (Davidson & Henshall 1989, figs 5 & 6) and provide an important but solitary outlier in the rich Deerness peninsula. Its discovery may also facilitate the identification and interpretation of other Neolithic monuments throughout Orkney.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Excavation at Hurnip's Point was supported by Historic Scotland and the Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford. The author is particularly grateful for the assistance of the Orkney archaeologist Dr Raymond Lamb, to Mark Gillings, and for the kind permission and support given by the landowner, Mr Douglas Scott of Mirkady.

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*This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Historic Scotland*