
10 Discussion

The excavations at Loth Road have revealed some of the physical remnants of what may have been an extensive and prolonged series of events that comprised the funerary ritual (Downes 1999a). Cremation, burial of selected remains and the construction of a monument are the most obvious archaeological parts of these events.

10.1 Mortuary activities and products

10.1.1 Cremation

Although the actual site of the pyre(s) was not observed within the area of excavation, some evidence of the cremation was retrieved. From the analysis of the bone it is difficult to conclude anything other than that the remains of only two people, an adult and an infant, were interred here with the remains of perhaps two pyres. They were cremated while bearing flesh, not long after death.

There were localized temperature differences within the pyre, shown by the presence of partially assimilated quartz grains in some of the cramp, indicating a temperature of 600–800°C (Carter 1997, 10) and by the glassy skin on others, indicating a temperature of 1000–1100°C (McKinley & Kibble 1999, 402). However, the pyre was clearly built by people who had the technical knowledge of the various factors that contribute to a ‘successful’ cremation, such as the size and stability of the pyre, the type and quantity of fuel, the circulation of oxygen, the correct placement of the body, so that it was constructed so that it burnt with a prolonged and high temperature, of sufficient heat to reduce the bodies to cremated bone (McKinley 1997, 132–4).

10.1.2 Fuel

The fuel used for the pyre comprised the only naturally available materials in the island (Hedges 1977, 143) – peat, supplemented by heathy turf and some wet fen material, laced with scrub and some driftwood. Body fat would also have acted as fuel. Although the site dates to a period of peat formation and woodland decline, the result of Neolithic activities and climatic change (Davidson & Jones 1990, 25–32), peat and other quality fuels have always been limited resources on Sanday (Bond 1994b, 129), so it is noteworthy that peat dominates the fuel types, over the remains of heathy turf for example.

There is evidence for the Neolithic and Bronze Age use of seaweed as a fuel, fertilizer and a contributor to cramp formation from Tofts Ness in Sanday, Mousland cairn near Stromness and Barnhouse, Stenness (Bond 1994b, 129–30; Milles 1994, 123–4; Stapleton & Bowman 2005, 383–4). There are also written references from the 16th century AD onwards that those inhabitants of Sanday who could afford it obtained peat from neighbouring islands, especially Eday, whilst others made do with sandy turves, dried cow dung, straw and dried seaweed (Fenton 1978, 206–10). However, some analyses indicate that it may be possible for cramp to form simply because high enough pyre temperatures were attained to fuse the silica in sedimentary material without using seaweed or seaweed ash (eg Carter 1997, 11–13).

10.1.3 Collection and deposition

The collection and interment of remains from the pyre was not simply a matter of collecting enough bone to represent the body and burying it in a pit, cist or urn, perhaps with some other pyre material included by accident. Recent research and excavations at Bronze Age funerary sites such as Linga Fiold have shown that pyre debris was sorted and deposited in different ways, that many features can be associated with the same cremation (Downes 1995, 399; McKinley 1997, 137–9; Downes forthcoming b).

A comparison of the material found in each sampled feature at Loth Road shows a significant difference in what was deposited in cists, pits and boxes, and sometimes between features of the same kind (Table 1). It is clear that the pyre remains were picked over, sorted, collected and deposited in different ways and, from the size of the cramp in Cist 006, while some of it was still hot. Collectively, the deposits comprise all aspects of pyre remains. The evidence indicates that the pits, boxes and cists are contemporary and should be looked at as a whole (cf Downes 2006).

Carbonized wild fuel resources, such as peat and turf, are the predominant remains in many of the pit fills, some of which contain so few pieces of other materials that they may have been accidental inclusions (McKinley 1997, 137). However, other deposits are different. One pit contains virtually nothing at all (that has survived), one a large deposit of wood charcoal and one a block of stone. Another contains steatite vessel fragments, one a comparatively significant amount of bone and yet another a large amount of cramp. The pit fills appear to be formal and specifically chosen deposits in deliberately cut features (McKinley 1997, 139).

The 'boxes' contain a comparatively even mixture of fuel remains and cramp. However, the amounts are so small that these might not have been the significant elements of the deposit.

Cramp and cremated bone dominate the cist fills. It is significant that the major collections of cramp and bone were deposited together, treated in a similar fashion as if of similar importance. This is no accident, as people were clearly capable of sorting one material from another and collecting them separately (Downes 2006). In some of the pits, the few fragments of cramp present can be explained as accidental inclusions, but in others, such as Pit 060 where 30 pieces were retrieved, cramp must have been an intentional part of the deposit. This selective treatment of cramp has been noted at other sites, such as Linga Fiold (Downes forthcoming). For example, in one of the features, cramp that contained visible bone fragments was deposited with the cremated bone, whilst cramp with no visible bone was placed on top of the slab that sealed the bone deposit (Carter 1997). Downes concludes that cramp chosen for burial with cremated bone or with other pyre debris is the result of the differential selection of cramp according to its proximity to the body (Downes 2006).

The cists are the major repositories of human remains at Loth Road and should probably be regarded as the primary burials. The cremated remains of a person were rarely, if ever, fully collected for burial (McKinley 1997, 137), but the amount at Loth Road is small indeed. It is a fraction of what is considered to form primary burials (McKinley 1997, 139–42), yet the manner in which the bones have been deposited display many of the traits of primary burials – they form the largest bone deposits on site, they have been placed in cists and one deposit forms the primary fill of an urn. One could claim that this was all the bone that was sorted and collected from the pyre remains, perhaps reflecting the standing of the deceased (McKinley 1997, 142). However, it is more precise to claim that this is the amount of bone that was chosen to be buried at this site and we do not know what happened to the remainder, which may have been abandoned, or may have been curated, utilized or disposed of in many different ways.

It is possible that Cist 069 contains the remains of a double burial, but the adult bone was retrieved from contaminated fills and must be discounted. However, perhaps one could interpret the site as a whole as that of a double burial, because the primary feature of these in Bronze Age Orkney (with one exception) is that of the pairing of an adult with an immature individual in the same feature (Downes 2006). At least six instances of such a pairing were found at Linga Fiold and several others have been found during excavations by the Orkney Barrows Project, including the sites of Gitterpitten and Varme Dale (Roberts 2000; Downes forthcoming).

Although experimental work has shown that it was quite feasible to collect the remains of two indi-

viduals cremated on the same pyre without mixing them up (McKinley 1997, 134), and much of the discussion above militates towards a single pyre, it is quite possible that, because the remains of the adult and the infant were interred separately, they were cremated individually. The details of their contexts are also distinct. Cist 006 stands proud of the contemporary surface, whilst Cist 069 is level with it. Cist 069 contains an inurned cremation burial, whereas Cist 006 does not. Cist 069 was capped before the kerb was built, whilst the fills of Cist 006 were sealed afterwards. Whether these people were cremated separately or not, it was considered appropriate to bury some of their remains at the same site.

Other materials were also regarded as significant enough for interment or placement at the site, such as the pottery fragments from Pit 050 and Spread 059 and the steatite vessel fragments from Pit 066. These may have been grave goods, because there is no evidence that these artefacts had been in the pyre.

10.2 Ritual, display and commemoration

Shortly after the features had been filled or sealed, a cairn was built on the site, starting with a free-standing circular kerb, which was infilled with rubble and capped by a layer of imported gravel and pebbles (illus 7 & 8). None of the burial features were enclosed or contained by the kerb wall and there was no apparent entrance. Although it appeared to be placed haphazardly over the pits, it did seem to take cognisance of the two cists, which in effect were incorporated into the outside of the structure. The close association of the cairn with the pits and cists leads to the conclusion that it acted as a memorial or marker for the burials. This is a slight variation on the usual layout of Bronze Age mounds and kerbed cairns in Orkney, which are usually centred over a cist, or may even contain one. The cairn was in a prominent location, with an extensive view (illus 2), visible to a wide area of the local population as well as community that built it.

Part of the funerary ritual appears to include the placement of certain artefacts, whether significant in themselves or as metaphysical symbols. The flaked flag fragments at the base of the cist, and especially the flaked stone disc or pot lid that sealed the urn, represent the time and skill of the person who made them and are associated with the containment of the deceased. The pottery and soapstone vessel fragments (SF18) appear to have been deliberately interred, perhaps as grave goods, or as part of the formal disposal of pyre remains or other rituals. The complete soapstone vessel was used as an urn for someone's cremated remains. The value of steatite must be considered here – soapstone or steatitic pottery vessels may have been more prestigious than local ceramics, because of their rarity and cost, which included labour and transport. Even the

broken fragments of SF18 must have been endowed with some value, reflected in their deliberate and formal deposition. The use of the complete steatite vessel as a cremation urn and grave good (not pyre good, see [McKinley 1994](#), 133) must have conferred some status on the dead and/or the living who could afford to own it and then to dispose of it. It may be that wild resources were not husbanded with care at all, but it is possible that the use of limited resources, especially peat, reflects an element of lavish expenditure on the pyre.

Coarse stone tools often seem to play a part at Bronze Age funerary monuments in Orkney and the inclusion of agricultural implements especially seems to be an integral part of funerary ritual ([Downes 1994](#), 150–1; [Clarke 2006](#), 105–7). The possible cobble tool setting at Loth Road echoes a nest of three large used cobbles on the platform of Mound 7 at Linga Fiold ([Downes forthcoming](#)). The inclusion of coarse stone tools on the site, mostly associated with its final capping in the mound material itself, is not because they have been discarded, but because their function has changed, they are no longer simply agrarian implements.

10.3 The Orcadian context

The site fits firmly within a dated sequence of Early–Middle Bronze Age Orcadian funerary monuments ([Ashmore 2003](#), 35, 44–5) and shares many traits that are part of a common tradition of ritual behaviour, exemplified by the results of the recent excavation of the cemetery at Linga Fiold ([Downes 1995](#); [Downes forthcoming b](#)). The site's highly visible location on land marginal to agriculture is typical of many in Orkney ([Hedges 1977](#), 140), but the small size and type of cairn construction is less so, although this may be due to what has been excavated so far. The freestanding kerb, faced on both sides, is less common than the more usual construction of a kerbed cairn with a low outer face only, capped by turf and earth scraped up from the surrounding area ([Barber et al 1996](#), 116). Two such freestanding kerbs were found at Linga Fiold to the north of Mound 7, centred over pits containing pyre material ([Downes 1995](#), 399 plan & pers comm). Two more have been excavated in the Rendall area, one at Varmedale and another at Gitterpitten, both with central cists ([Downes 1999b](#), 11, 16, illus 3, 8, 15b).

The differential burial of sorted remains, including cremated bone and the construction of a cairn over these with the deposition of agricultural implements is paralleled at sites such as Linga Fiold and the Knowes of Quoyscottie ([Hedges 1977](#); [Downes 1995](#)). The work at Linga Fiold has resulted in the recognition of such details in and differences between deposits, that all features containing bone do not necessarily represent an individual cremation, thus helping in the re-interpretation of older excavations, as at the Knowes of Quoyscottie ([Downes 2006](#)).

Most of the sites quoted as parallels comprise pairs or groups of mounds. At Loth Road, it is possible that the mound of Structure 1, originally thought to be a clearance cairn, is actually a funerary monument. The large amount of cramp found over this area is reminiscent of the observation of large amounts of cramp on mounds, 'plentiful in certain parts of Sanday, as at the south end of the Els Ness peninsula, where a group of burial mounds were literally covered with it' ([Callander 1936](#), 445). Site 20, the mound to the west, may be another Bronze Age mound, forming a group of burial monuments at Loth Road ([Hunter & Dockrill 1991](#), 7–8).

10.4 The living

Many aspects of the site at Loth Road reflect the living as well as the dead. The fuels used for the pyre indicate the sources available for daily life. The flint, the marks on the steatite vessels and the agricultural implements are indicative of part of the toolkit available for subsistence activities and products of the period. Extensive remains of the farming represented by the ard point and sandstone bars have been recovered at the other end of Sanday, on Tofts Ness, where evidence Neolithic and Bronze Age clearance, ploughing, cereals and manuring has been found ([Dockrill et al 1994](#); [Simpson 1998](#)).

The site is on land considered to be marginal to agriculture, placed in order to avoid arable land, with the implication that this was more valuable ([Hedges 1977](#), 152). However, in a period of climatic deterioration in an environment that was marginally viable in general ([Bond 1994b](#), 130–1), heath land would also have been valuable as grazing land and a source of turf, a fragile resource that required careful husbanding ([Downes 1994](#), 152). Survey has identified several prehistoric field boundaries, settlement sites and burnt mounds on Spurness, some of which will be contemporary with the cairn ([Hunter & Dockrill 1991](#), 6–9). These include a burnt mound and two settlements less than 500m north of the site ([Lamb 1980](#), sites 51, 89, 90; [Hunter & Dockrill 1991](#), sites 44, 52, 53; Orkney SMR OR 367, 366, 365). The funerary monument at Loth Road stood not in isolation, but as part of the landscape of a living community, for the living to continue their relationship with the dead, perhaps perpetually vindicating their place in the landscape through the presence of their ancestors.

The steatite vessels at Loth Road, along with many others found across the islands, as well as Bronze Age ceramic urns made with steatitic clay from Shetland ([Sheridan 2003](#), 213), reflect some of the more outward-looking aspects of the population, systems of trade, barter or exchange. Although the number of such vessels in Orkney is not huge, the radiocarbon-dated urns from Orkney indicate that the sea was crossed with some regularity over several hundred years. The route of communication

was probably via Fair Isle, which is visible from both island groups, where a Bronze Age soapstone funerary urn has also been found (Hunter 1996, 27). Their presence implies the occurrence of other socio-

cultural and artefactual exchanges between the two archipelagos (Øvrevik 1990, 144–5; Hunter 1996) and is a tribute to the boat technology and seafaring skills of the time.