
11 Conclusions

In conclusion, and despite the truncation of deposits that had occurred at the site, utilizing excavation data, dating evidence and parallels from other Orcadian barrow sites, it is possible to offer three reconstructions of the overall chronology of the site:

Interpretation 1 – The primary burial on site was an inhumation contained within the large rock-cut cist. Subsequently, a typical freestanding cist containing a cremation was constructed on the site and covered by an artificial mound. A secondary cist burial also containing a cremation was constructed at this time or shortly afterwards and also covered by mound material.

Interpretation 2 – The rock-cut cist and the cists within the mound are broadly contemporary. The mound cists were constructed as described above, and the rock-cut cist constructed to the western side.

Interpretation 3 – The mound cists were constructed on the site as described above. The rock-cut cist is a later addition to the site.

Each of these scenarios offers its own potential importance to the understanding of the cist-building traditions in Orkney, but at present none can be fully substantiated from the excavation results from the site, or from wider Orcadian parallels. What is clear is that the cist burial tradition in the islands is both complex and only partially understood at present. It would appear, however, that on morphological grounds a previously unidentified tradition may be emerging from recently excavated sites in the islands, which I have termed the ‘pit cist’. As has been demonstrated, these subterranean pit cists are distinct in several ways to the better documented ‘mound and cist’ and flat cist traditions, and would appear to represent an alternative way of interring the dead – structurally, psychologically and symbolically. The main morphological traits can be seen as the:

- presence of a large pit, often rock-cut
- insertion of a cist, reinforced, supported or enhanced by elements of dry-stone walling
- subterranean nature of the cist
- frequent presence of an inhumation burial
- lack of visible superstructure.

These traits echo the architectural features of many of the Neolithic tombs throughout the islands, and pit cists may indeed prove to have a Neolithic origin. Variations among sites apply, in common with other Orcadian cist traditions, but are likely to reflect local preference or reaction to particular local circumstances. These basic morphological differences remain the same.

It is tempting to suggest at Ferndale that the pit cist is the earliest burial on site, possibly Neolithic, which provided a focus for a later barrow. In this light, the site could be seen as demonstrating the symbolic reuse not only of earlier material culture, but also place and landscape. Perhaps such pit cists represent a crossover point between old and new ways of social organization and treatment of the dead; between the passage tombs and chambered cairns of the Neolithic and the flat cists and cists within mounds of the Bronze Age; between earlier inhumation practices and later preferences for cremation. Given the longevity of use and changes in burial practice potentially demonstrated at Sand Fiold, this is indeed a tempting suggestion. At present, however, based on the excavation data from Ferndale and the wider parallels that exist, such an observation can only be speculation. It is hoped that further synthetic research on excavated examples and refinement of dating evidence from as yet unexcavated and undiscovered sites may help, in time, to resolve their true significance and the place of Ferndale within the Orcadian cist burial tradition.