

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Recovered from a variety of contexts, human remains are one of the most emotive relics of our past, presenting us with a tangible connection to our ancestors. Beyond this, they have the potential to provide us with a wealth of data concerning aspects of the past including health, life-style, diet, and inter-personal violence. Evidently, their value as an archaeological resource cannot be doubted. Human remains also possess significance beyond their value as a reservoir of scientific information. Their context of recovery is critical to the comprehension not only of the deposition of the remains themselves, but to the overall interpretation of the archaeological site they are recovered from. Unfortunately, some time periods and regions have yielded a greater wealth of material than others. At the end of their recent volume, 'People of the Long Barrows', Smith & Brickley (2009, 148) state that one of the key challenges in studying human remains from the British Neolithic is the small sizes of the assemblages. This has led to difficulties in determining convincing conclusions. However, in Orkney, a number of the Neolithic tombs are distinguished from this evaluation, having yielded thousands of fragments of human bone. It is the human remains associated with the Orcadian megaliths that form the focus of this research.

Orkney's Neolithic tombs are renowned for their stunning architecture. Their preservation and high degree of visibility in the landscape has drawn the eye of archaeologists and antiquarians for many years. However, whilst the physicality of the tombs has been comprehensively documented, their specific purpose and function is more contentious. Several hypotheses exist to account for the condition of the associated human remains, with themes of transformation, manipulation and movement permeating the literature. However, whether considered the result of excarnation or secondary deposition, many of the interpretations of funerary practice in Orkney (and Britain) have depended on revisiting original excavation reports, rather than the osseous material, a situation that has come under recent criticism (Beckett & Robb 2009, 57). Despite the volume of archive material, it is a resource that has received little attention. This state of affairs reflects not only the formidable amount of bone, but also its highly fragmentary and 'chaotic' condition. Traditional osteological analyses are concerned with retrieving demographic information from skeletal populations. The absence of discrete skeletons within many of the Orcadian assemblages precludes such analysis. This material has

therefore been considered unlikely to provide further evidence that might enhance our understanding of past populations, and has been left languishing on the shelves of museum stores, untapped.

In recent years, advances in the fields of forensic archaeology and taphonomy have furnished researchers with a new set of tools with which to approach less straightforward assemblages, such as those encountered in the Orcadian megaliths. Thus, the key characteristic that has previously deterred further investigation is now the trait that renders them of particular interest.

1.2 Aims

Osteologists have come under criticism for failing to integrate their data with wider archaeological debates (Sofaer 2006, 1–2; Beckett & Robb 2009, 57). Archaeologists are also facing criticism for focusing on the objects that accompany and surround bodies, rather than the bodies themselves (Sofaer 2006, 2; Gowland & Knüsel 2009, xi). One of the aims of this research, therefore, was to integrate osteological evidence more closely with the archaeological data in order to reconstruct activities associated with the Orcadian tombs. The megalithic tombs in Orkney present ideal circumstances in striving to achieve this as a paucity of other artefacts within the structures focuses attention on the human remains.

This research project involved a taphonomic analysis of human remains from the Orcadian tombs in order to understand the mechanisms involved in transforming whole corpses to their present fragmentary condition. Understanding these processes could lead to a greater insight into the use and significance of the monuments in which they were located. The primary site investigated was the Maeshowe-type tomb of Quanterness on Mainland (Renfrew 1979), reported as containing a minimum of 157 excarnated individuals, represented by 12,500 disarticulated bone fragments. Descriptions of the highly fragmentary condition of these remains, in tandem with recent advances in taphonomic interpretations and the excellent standard of excavation employed, inferred this large assemblage had the potential to yield new information.

In order to further contextualise the results obtained from the Quanterness analysis, four further assemblages and a sample from a fifth were also examined. The sites

of Quoyness, Sanday; Point of Cott, Westray; Pierowall Quarry, Westray; Cuween Hill, Mainland and a sample from Isbister, South Ronaldsay, were selected for this purpose. Some of the key questions this research addresses are as follows:

- What is the skeletal profile of each assemblage?
- How have the human remains composing the assemblages come to be in such a fragmented and disorganised state? Is it through anthropogenic intervention, natural processes or a combination of both?
- Do the assemblages reflect similar or divergent sequences of post-mortem events?
- Does the taphonomic evidence provide further insight into the mortuary processes and treatment of the dead?
- Does the new evidence support or refute the current hypotheses for mortuary practices in Neolithic Orkney?
- Can a better understanding of the processes the human remains have been subjected to permit greater insight into the funerary practices and purpose of the megalithic tombs?
- How do the Orcadian megaliths compare to their mainland and Irish counter-parts?

This project is concerned with understanding the mortuary rites pertaining to the condition of the human remains. It is not focused on interpreting the lifestyles of the living populations from evidence of age, stature and health. The fragmentary nature of the particular assemblages investigated creates significant limitations in the amount of demographic information that may be derived. However, information of this nature, when present, was recorded and although not included in the main body of the book, it is presented in Appendix 6.

1.3 Summary

This study is valuable for a number of reasons. It is the first time the assemblages of Quanterness and comparative sites have been examined in such detail. Whilst initially a formidable task, this process has generated a significant amount of new data, not only with regard to skeletal preservation, but also indicating direct anthropogenic involvement in the manipulation of some of the osseous material. This is the first time this has been ascertained for the Orcadian remains. This new data also serves to challenge a number of the current interpretations. However, it is not simply a means of proving or disproving current hypotheses. With the deconstruction of existing theories, new interpretations of the treatment of the body and their implications for understanding the purpose of the tombs are also proffered. This study demonstrates that despite the intimidating and formidable amount of material, it is possible to bring some order, and therefore understanding, to what these assemblages actually represent.