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On the fringe of Neolithic Europe: excavation of a chambered cairn on the Holm of Papa Westray, Orkney

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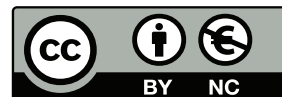
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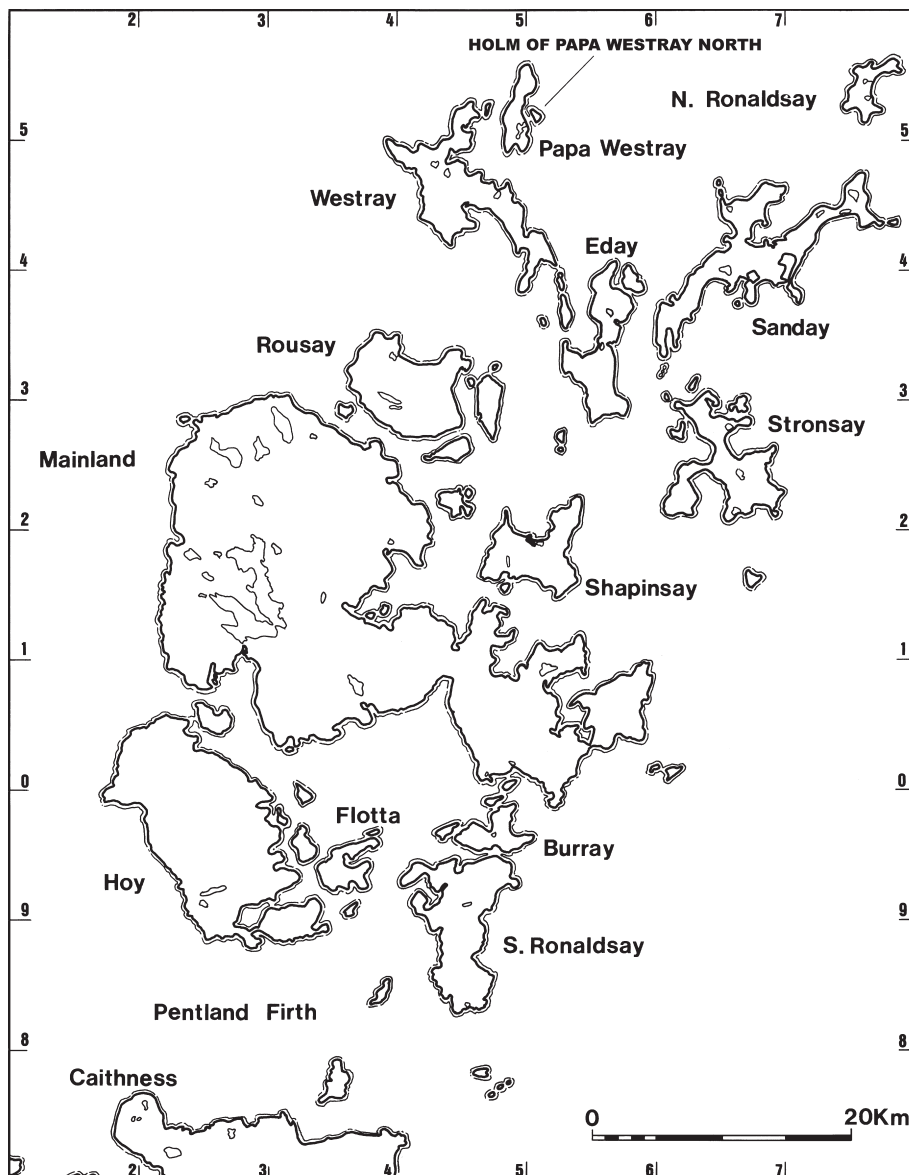
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Introduction

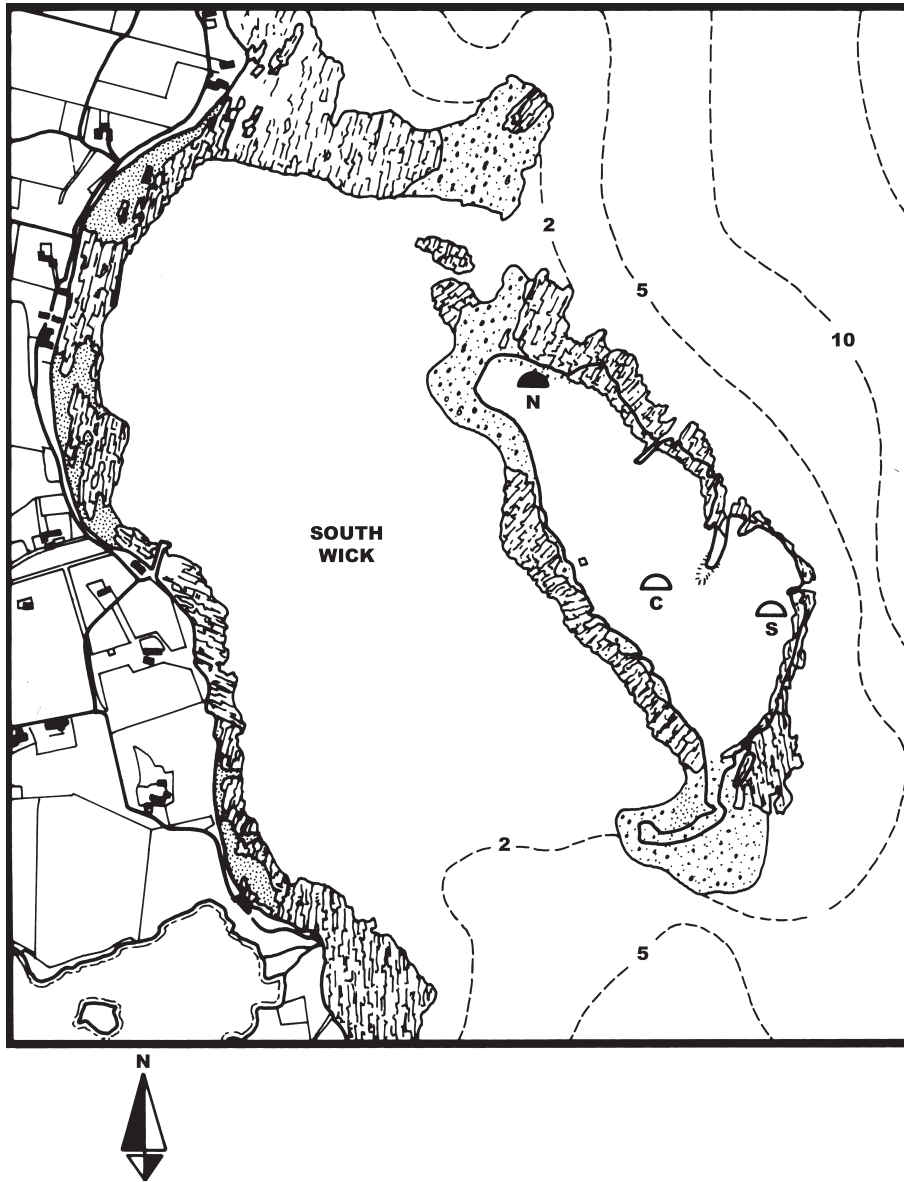
The Holm of Papa Westray, also known as Holm of Papa or Holm of Papay and locally as the Holm, is a small island off the east coast of Papa Westray (Papay), one of the Northern Isles of Orkney (illus 1). Some 19ha in extent, the Holm is about 0.9km by

a maximum of 0.6km and shelters the bay of South Wick, where until 1970, when a new pier was built at the southern end of Papa Westray, the weekly ferry from Kirkwall docked at the pier (Rendall 2002, 4). The description of Papa Westray in Blaeu's *Atlas*



Illus 1
Location map for the Holm of Papa Westray, Orkney

HOLM OF PAPA WESTRAY



Illus 2

The Holm of Papa Westray and surrounding marine contours in metres (scale 1:75000), showing the locations of the cairns Holm of Papa Westray North (N), Holm of Papa Westray South (S) and Holm of Papa Westray Middle (M)

Novus, written around 1644, mentions that the island is ‘adorned with a quite commodious harbour, between the island itself and the neighbouring holm’ (Irvine 2006, 23–4), and Sibbald in 1711 described ‘a little Grass Isle, belonging to it, called the Holm of Papa, lying to the East, which makes a good Road for Ships, which go thither a Fishing, but very shallow’ (Sibbald 1711, 8). This natural harbour was used during the

herring fishing of the 19th century, and Brand records that the Holm was used as a shore station: ‘where I saw the ruins of some Huts or little Houses, whereunto these Enster Men sometimes resorted, during the Herring-fishing’ (Brand 1883, 31). The Holm is now uninhabited and belongs to Holland Farm, and it is used to pasture a flock of about 100 native sheep, which supplements its diet of poor quality grass with

seaweed at low tide (Rendall 2002, 79). Formerly there were also a small number of ponies on the island. The underlying rock belongs to the Rousay Flagstone Group of the Middle Old Red Sandstone and, at the higher south-east point of the island, about 15m OD, there are steep cliffs, a cave and two narrow inlets known as geos (illus 2). During winter storms, sea spray covers the entire island and the sea washes up the geos and runs down the western slope. The island has a fringe of rock platforms, which at the north end are close enough to Shorehouse Taing, an expanse of tidal rocks projecting eastwards from the shore of Papay, to make it possible at an exceptionally low tide to wade between the two (John Rendall, pers comm). The marine contours around the island show that it is based on a shelf that is at most only 2m below sea level (illus 2), and even in recent times at such a low tide the bay has been virtually dry (Neil Rendall, pers comm). Sea level around Orkney has been rising steadily over the last six millennia, and it seems likely that in Neolithic times the Holm was a promontory of Papay rather than an island (Brown 2003, 20–3; Ritchie 1983, 59; Sturt has gone a step further and has drawn a map of the possible landform of Papa Westray in the early Neolithic, which fills in the bay of South Wick entirely: 2005, fig 7.4). The rocky coasts of Papa Westray and the Holm provide a habitat for limpets today and in the past, and there are razorfish in the bay (Jocelyn and Neil Rendall, pers comm). There is a freshwater spring on the north-east side of the island.

There are two certain and one possible chambered cairns on the Holm, known as Holm of Papa Westray North, Holm of Papa Westray South and Holm of Papa Westray Centre (NGR HY 504522, 509518 and 507518; Davidson & Henshall 1989, nos 21, 22 and 64; RCAHMS 1946, nos 545, 544 and 546) (illus 2). The south cairn was known to fishermen as a sea mark, The Disses o' the Holm, from Old Norse *dys* meaning cairn, and the use of the plural implies that the north cairn was also a prominent mound, particularly as another sea mark on the east coast was known as Milliedissan or 'between the disses' (Marwick 1925, 46–7). By the time that Petrie and Hebden excavated the north cairn in 1854 much of its stonework had been robbed, probably during the early 19th-century improvements to the Holland estate (Rendall 2002, 25–31). Stones from the centre cairn were almost certainly robbed to build the nearby pony house. The massive south cairn survived rather better until Captain F W L Thomas opened the mound with the help of

crew from HM cutter *Woodlark*, a naval survey ship, in 1849 (Davidson & Henshall 1989, 6, 121). The 6" Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1878, records the location of the north cairn along with the inscription 'Human Remains & Deer Horns found A.D. 1849', but that date must have been confused with Thomas' exploration of the south cairn, for Petrie would have known of any recent investigation of the north cairn. The Ordnance Survey Name Book for the parish of Westray, dated 1897, attributes the information to Thomas Traill, the landowner, and it seems likely that he misremembered the date of Petrie's excavation. The presence in the southern part of the Holm of blanket peat necessitated a grid of drainage ditches, probably dug during the early 19th-century estate improvements.

Following the identification of Knap of Howar on the west coast of Papa Westray as an Unstan ware settlement with strong architectural and cultural links with Orkney-Cromarty cairns with stalled chambers (Ritchie 1983), there was a clear opportunity to locate and excavate the stalled cairn with which the settlement might have been associated. No chambered cairns are known in Papa Westray itself, and the nearest surviving cairns with stalled chambers are Point of Cott on the east coast of Westray (NGR HY 465474) and Holm of Papa Westray North. The latter was selected for a small-scale research excavation, and Point of Cott was entirely excavated over the following two years by John Barber of AOC (Scotland) Ltd as a rescue operation with a research strategy for Historic Scotland (Barber 1997).

Holm of Papa Westray North was first excavated by the Orcadian antiquarian George Petrie with R J Hebden of Eday over two days, 29–30 September 1854 (Petrie 1857). This was the first time that a chambered cairn had been recognised as a 'sepulchral mound' rather than a 'Picts' house' (Hedges 1983, 189), and Petrie records that he 'had long desired to explore' it. In addition to the published report, there are two manuscript accounts that add a little more information, and these are included here as an appendix. It is clear from these records, which include a measured plan, that Petrie excavated only the first three compartments of the chamber and did not penetrate either into the fourth compartment or into the entrance passage. Nor did the excavation reach the floor throughout the chamber, and despite the wealth of bones and antlers that were encountered only a few were removed, including a single human skull, and taken to the museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in Edinburgh (now

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the National Museums Scotland). There were thus the strong possibilities that an intact fourth chamber and an intact passage remained to be excavated and that the total assemblage of bones and artefacts might be recovered. In addition the marginal character of the island made it likely that the immediate area around the cairn had survived relatively unscathed by human interference in recent centuries. The excavation took place over three weeks in July 1982 and four weeks in July 1983. At the request of the landowners, Mr and Mrs John Rendall, an attempt was made at the end of the second season to leave the cairn both protected and comprehensible to visitors. Polythene sheeting was laid over the cairn, sufficient soil was placed in

the chamber and entrance passage to protect the structure, turf was relaid and the outline of the cairn was reconstructed in stone. To the immediate east of the cairn is a rectangular pile of stones excavated from the site during the work described here (4.4m × 1.7m and 1.2m high).

This report is presented in two parts: the first deals with the excavated structures, artefacts and environmental evidence and discusses them in relation to the results of the various specialist studies, while Part 2 consists of those specialist studies, some of which are part of wider external research and thus extend their remit beyond that of the basic site-specific report. The site archive will be found in the RCAHMS Archive.