Tres Ness chambered tomb, Sanday:

Excavations in 2017

Data Structure Report

Grid ref: HY 711 375

Scheduled monument number: SM1330

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Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd agus nan Eilean

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Introduction

Tresness chambered tomb is located on the southern tip of the Tresness peninsula, Sanday, Orkney (Figure 1). It is a site which has not seen significant previous excavation. This report describes excavations conducted in August and September 2017 and offers an assessment of the on-going erosion at the site.

Figure 1. The location of Tresness, Sanday, Orkney highlighted in red

Archaeological background

Neolithic chambered tombs are one of the most visible remains in the landscape and have featured heavily in accounts of this period. Early researchers such as Stuart Piggott conducted numerous excavations at chambered tomb sites across Britain and Ireland, but after a period of intense research focussed on the middle of the twentieth century, less work has been completed on this monument class from the 1980s onwards. However, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in these sites and new techniques have enabled us to make important advances in our understanding of these monuments. New work has been conducted on the Cotswold-Severn monuments of southern England and Wales (Bayliss and Whittle 2007), a new research project has investigated the 'dolmen' monuments of western Britain and Ireland (Cummings and

Richards forthcoming), and new excavations have been conducted on the Clyde cairns of western Scotland (e.g. Cummings and Robinson 2015). In conjunction with this new work, innovative scientific techniques now enable us to utilise the data acquired from these sites in a myriad of ways including investigating what people were eating (stable isotope analysis), the origins of people buried at these sites (strontium isotope analysis, aDNA) and the use of material culture (lipid analysis). While the Orcadian chambered tombs are well-known in north-west Europe little new work taken place at them in recent years, especially in comparison with the wealth of Neolithic settlement sites now recorded on Orkney (Richards 2005; Richards and Jones 2015). New work at these sites is therefore required to bring the Orcadian sequence up to date in terms of wide knowledge of these sites. A new excavation of a stalled cairn is therefore timely in order to move our knowledge of these important sites forward.

Tresness was selected as a site for investigation for a number of reasons. First, it appears to be the remains of a well-preserved stalled cairn. The precise nature of the architecture at the site, however, is unclear. It clearly has a stalled cairn component, but it survives as a round mound representing a possible later addition. Second, the site is being actively eroded by the sea and the collapse of the cliff on which it stands. It is desirable to explore specific research questions at a site which also under threat, instead of targeting a site which is not threatened. Thirdly, we have identified Neolithic settlement contemporary with the monument close by at Cata Sand. This places the excavation of Tresness into a wider context. There is potential for additional work also to further enhance the wider context of Tresness.

Specific research questions

1. Smith (1983) suggested that this was the remains of a stalled cairn but this is 'pure speculation' (Smith 1983, 4). At the most basic level, it would be desirable to know whether this was indeed the remains of a stalled cairn, or, as hinted at by the presence of a round mound, a monument which saw later alteration. To be able to classify this monument would enable us to place it within its wider chronological context on Sanday and in Orkney more broadly.
2. By exposing and recording standing masonry and form we may be able to say more about phasing at the site. The multi-phase nature of chambered tombs on both Orkney and more widely in Scotland is an important component of these sites which remains poorly understood. The excavations at Point of Cott (Barber 1997) and Holm of Papa Westray North (Ritchie 2009) are by far the best examples of the complex, multi-phase nature of these sites, yet at present this phenomenon is poorly understood beyond these

two examples. This is because old excavations focussed more or less entirely on the chamber.

3. While the excavation here is unlikely to answer this question this season (i.e. further work would be required) the precise dating of this monument would greatly enhance our understanding of the Orcadian chambered tomb sequence, monuments which have poor chronological resolution when compared with, for example, Clyde cairns, court cairns or Cotswold-Severn cairns (see Cummings 2017). This is one of the priority research questions for Orkney as detailed by ScARF.

Methodology

We were granted Scheduled Monument Consent to open up a long thin trench over the chambered tomb orientated roughly north-south (Figure 2). The trench was roughly 12m x 3m north-south incorporating the main bulk of the monument as it appears on the ground. This trench only involved the removal of the turf, top soil and loose material on the monument: no archaeological features or layers were excavated. The turf was cut and removed by hand and then the top soil removed by trowel. All finds in the topsoil were recorded in three dimensions. We also cleaned the section through the southern extent of the monument which had been created by coastal erosion. The original plan had been to draw both the trench and section by hand at 1:20 (plan of trench) and 1:10 (section), however, access to the section was severely impeded by the recent collapse of the south-eastern portion of the cliff-face meaning that access was no longer possible. We chose, therefore, to record the monument in its entirety by photogrammetry.

At the end of the excavation the exposed trench was then covered by a layer of teram (semi-permable membrane) and then all stone and soil returned to the trench.

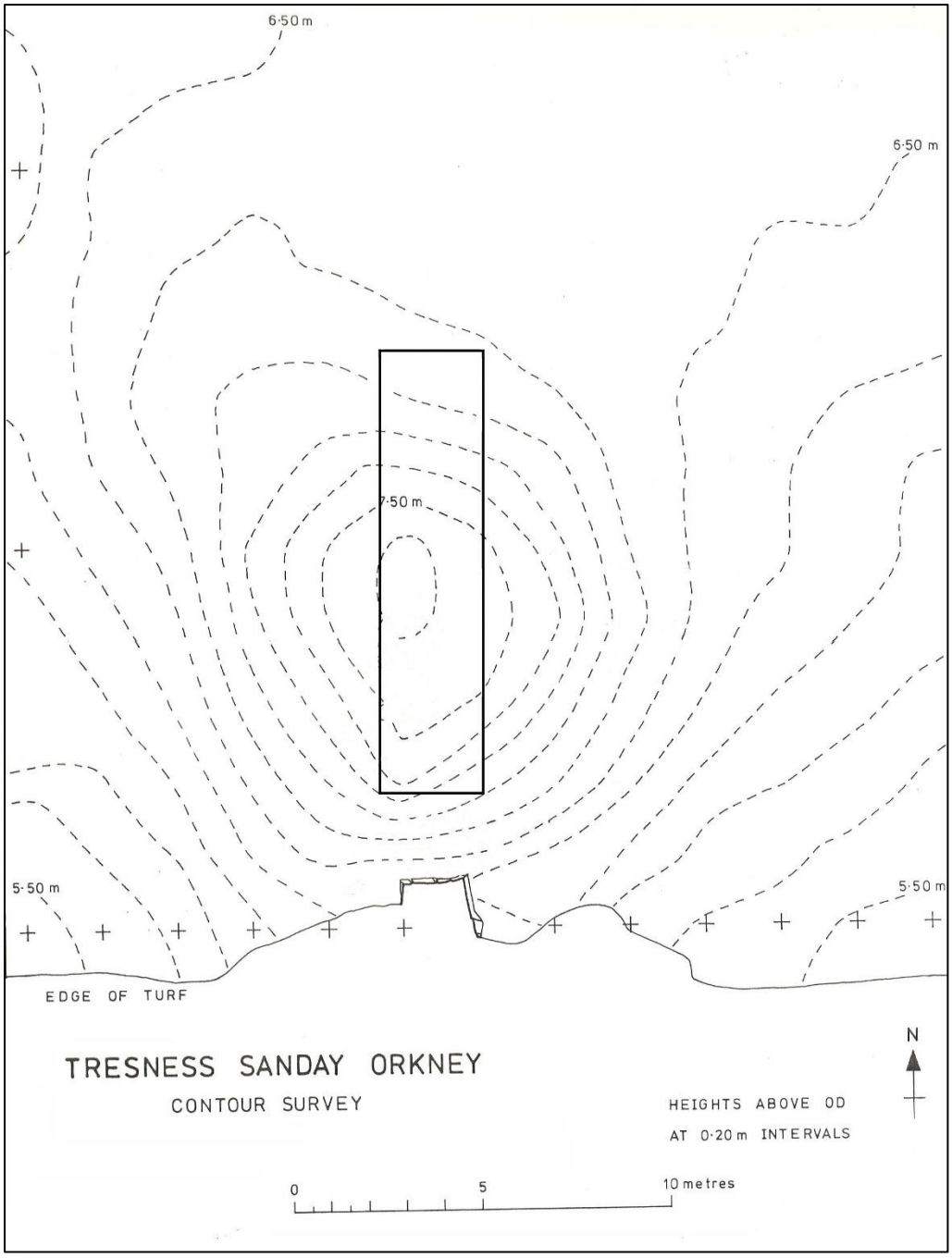

Figure 2. Contour survey of the monument at Tresness with the location of the trench (after Smith 1983)

Figure 3. Vertical view of the trench through the cairn

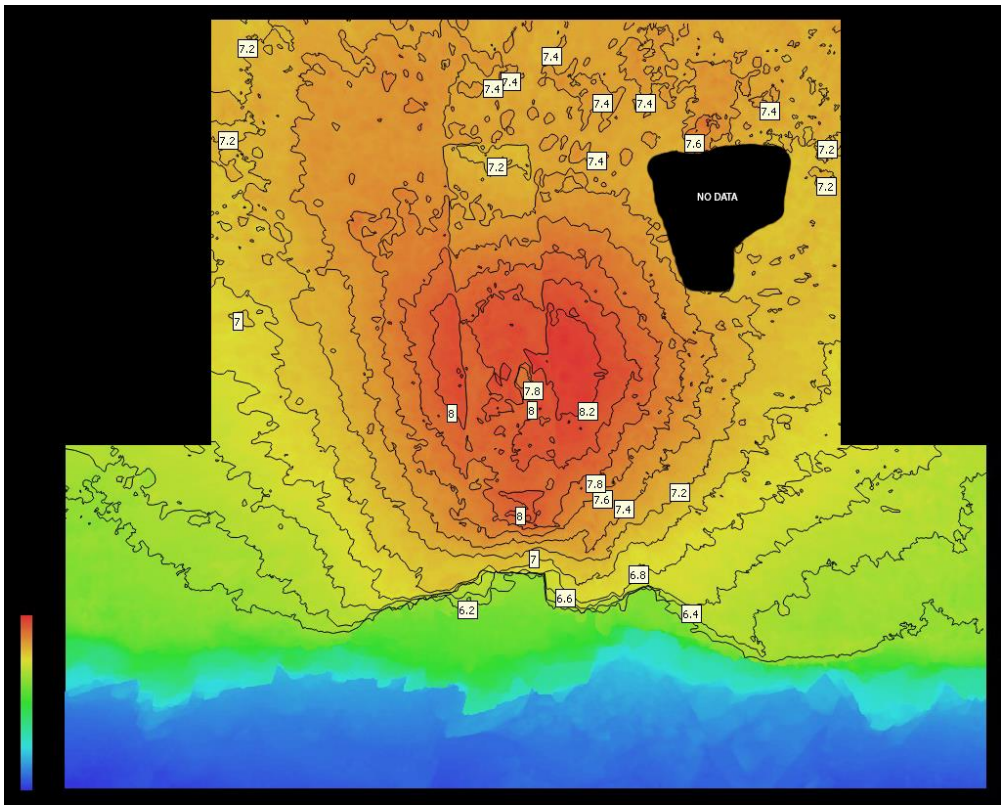

Figure 4. Digital contour survey of Tresness

Excavation results

Once the turf was removed we encountered a fairly thick layer of silt (001 - topsoil). This cleaned off to reveal the uppermost layer of cairn material (002) with a matrix of silt and small eroded pieces of sandstone (003). On the northernmost side of the cairn we uncovered what appeared to be an *in situ* kerbstone (006) and beyond this was displaced cairn material which had slipped off the main body of the cairn (007). Within the mound we revealed a stretch of dry-stone walling (004) which had previously been visible on the surface (see Davidson and Henshall 1989) and is presumed to be the upper portion of the western wall of the chamber. It was supported by an orthostat (005) which may be one side of a stall within the chamber.

Figure 5. The exposed cairn, looking south towards Stronsay. The *in situ* kerbstone (006) is marked by an arrow

These excavations did not disturb any archaeological layers bar revealing the cairn. It is possible to suggest, however, that the cairn is well-preserved, although the earlier investigation of the chamber in one area is apparent from the quantity of very loose large slabs strewn around this area. It was not possible to assess how far these earlier investigations had gone without more extensive excavation which was beyond the remit of the Scheduled Monument Consent.

Figure 6. Dry-stone walling on the western extent of the exposed chamber sitting on top of another orthostatic stall indicated by an arrow. The other slabs have been displaced, presumably in antiquity, by someone investigating the chamber

Recording of the eroding section

We also cleaned up the eroding section which cuts across the southern portion of the monument. This section was drawn by Smith in 1983 and so we planned to redraw the section to enable a direct comparison between the present state of preservation to enable an assessment of how much had eroded since 1983. Unfortunately so much of the cliff-edge directly beneath the eastern portion of the section had fallen away meant that it was no longer possible to either clean this part of the section nor draw it by hand. As such we decided to employ photogrammetry to record the section (Figure 8).

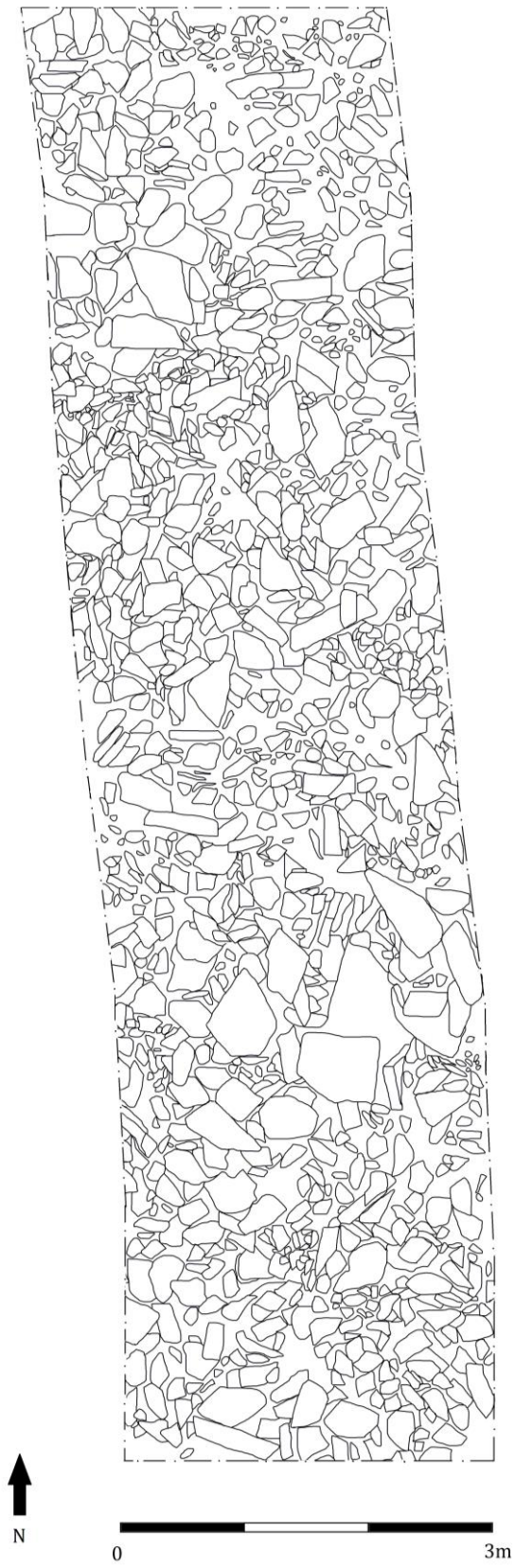

Figure 7. Plan of the trench through the cairn

See pullout pages

Figure 8. The section through the cairn on the southern side of the monument

Figure 9. The masonry visible in the section. To the right is dry-stone walling which is the eastern extent of the chamber or passage walling in this area. To the left one of the orthostatic stalls is visible, although it has been shattered on its upper surface. The horizontal slabs have slumped inwards since being recorded by Smith in 1983. The broken right orthostatic stall stone is indicated by an arrow

The section has eroded significantly since recorded by Smith in 1983. Some stones in her drawing are still clearly visible in the section, particularly those for substantial features such as walls. There are many patches, however, which have obviously eroded since 1983. The fact that we were unable to record sections of this by hand indicates the wider erosion of the site, discussed in more detail below.

We had hoped to be able to obtain a kubiena tin for micromorphology from the eroding section especially to acquire material from the old ground surface/directly underneath the primary cairn. The section was too stony for this to be possible.

Assessment of the erosion at site

It is clear that the site is suffering from ongoing and significant coastal erosion. Some of the archaeology recorded by Smith in 1983 has gone or deteriorated, and the site has further eroded into the sea. The key changes since Smith's 1983 assessment are:

- the curving wall recorded to the south of the section has gone completely

-the slabs overlying the passage or chamber visible in the section (possibly from a later round cairn and associated kerbing) have collapsed inwards

-the western dry-stone walling of the entrance or chamber has collapsed, with some slabs no longer *in situ*

-much of the cliff which she has drawn in her plan of the site is now gone. She was able to stand on and record an area to the south-east of the section and her plan shows masonry sticking out over land – this land is no longer present and the masonry sticks out directly over the cliff edge. This means that up to 1.5m of archaeology has disappeared since 1983. This is the most pronounced on the eastern extent of the site.

Management recommendations and suggested further work

The site is actively eroding into the sea and remains very vulnerable to further erosion. This is currently most pronounced on the eastern side of the section. There is no obvious solution to this problem, since the site is located on the edge of a steep cliff. If Historic Environment Scotland wished to support the research excavation of a stalled cairn in Northern Scotland, however, this would be excellent choice since, ultimately, it will be destroyed by coastal erosion.

Post-excavation schedule

Only four finds were recovered from the excavations at Tresness. There is therefore no post-excavation required.

Public outreach component

We had volunteers from Sanday working on the site. We gave a talk to the Sanday community towards the end of the project. This was attended by over 50 people. We are currently preparing an article for *Current Archaeology* and the project will feature on Digging for Britain. The longer-term aim is that this work will feed in the 'Tombs of the North' project which is aimed to increase visitors to the outer Orkney islands by creating a tombs' trail and associated literature.

Figure 9. The top image is taken from Smith's 1983 assessment of the site. Below is the chamber today. The wall at the front of the monument has completely gone, and some of the supporting slabs have slumped in

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Registers

Context register

Context no	Description	Date
001	Topsoil	21-8-17
002	Upper level of cairn	30-8-17
003	Soil matrix around 002	30-8-17
004	Dry-stone walling west side of chamber	30-8-17
005	Orthostat under 004	30-8-17
006	Kerbing – edge of cairn on northern side	30-8-17
007	Tumble off and beyond original cairn	30-8-17
008	Orthostat visible in section – west side	31-8-17
009	Orthostat visible in section (snapped) – east side	31-8-17
010	Walling running N-S visible in section	31-8-17

Finds register

Finds no	Context	Material	Date
1	001	Flaked stone tool – ard	21-8-17
2	001	Flaked stone tool	21-8-17
3	001	Flaked stone tool – mattock	21-8-17
4	001	Flint flake	21-8-17

Photo register

Photo no	Date	Description	Direction
1	19-8-17	Pre-excavation of main cairn	S
2	19-8-17	Pre-excavation of main cairn	W
3	19-8-17	Pre-excavation of main cairn	E
4	21-8-17	Removal of turf and cleaning	NW
5	21-8-17	Removal of turf and cleaning	W
6	21-8-17	Removal of turf and cleaning	SE
7	21-8-17	Removal of turf and cleaning	E
8	30-8-17	Cleaning the cairn	S
9	30-8-17	Cleaning the cairn	NE

10	30-8-17	Cleaning the cairn	S
11	30-8-17	Cleaning the cairn	SE
12	30-8-17	Cleaning dry-stone walling 004	W
13	30-8-17	Extension being cleaned	E
14	30-8-17	Chamber and walling 004	N
15	30-8-17	Extension being cleaned	N
16	31-8-17	Post-excavation cairn	S
17	31-8-17	Dry-stone walling cleaned 004	W
18	31-8-17	Detail of 004	W
19	31-8-17	Pebbles (hammerstones?) in cairn	Vertical
20	31-8-17	Post-ex of cairn	N
21	31-8-17	Post-ex of cairn	N
22	31-8-17	Detail of walling in section 008, 009, 010	NE
23	31-8-17	Walling in section 010	E