

Excavations at the Stones of Stenness, Orkney

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‘The Standing Stones of Stennis, as by a little pleonasm this remarkable monument is termed, furnishes an irresistible refutation of the opinion of such antiquaries as hold that the circles usually called Druidical were peculiar to that race of priests. There is every reason to believe that the custom was as prevalent in Scandinavia as in Gaul or Britain, and as common to the mythology of Odin as to Druidical superstition. There is even reason to think that the Druids never occupied any part of the Orkneys, and tradition, as well as history, ascribes the Stones of Stennis to the Scandinavians.’

Thus did Sir Walter Scott introduce readers of ‘The Pirate’ to the setting of the climax of his novel. Scott visited the site in August 1814 during his cruise with the Commissioners of Northern Lights and at that time there were four impressive standing stones, the stump of a fifth and another slab in the centre of the site. In December 1814, however, the tenant farmer felled one upright and broke up a second, before local opinion forced him to halt the destruction. Antiquarian opinion in the 19th century held that there had been the remains of a ‘dolmen’ or ‘cromlech’ within the stone circle, but this seems to have comprised parts of the upright broken in 1814 and the slab already in the centre of the site. When the Stones of Stenness were taken into guardianship by the then Office of Works the ‘dolmen’ was built, though this has been universally condemned since. The writer would be interested to know of any illustrations of the re-erection of the stone in 1906 or of the building of the ‘dolmen’ in 1907. Nor is Scott’s mention of the Scandinavian association with Stenness as strange as it seems, for there are references in the sagas that may relate to the site. Again the writer would be interested in any further information on this topic.

Small scale excavation was undertaken in 1973 after an act of vandalism in which the capstone of the ‘dolmen’ had been pushed over. The purposes of the excavation were to discover

more about the standing stone circle and the outer ditch and bank that were known to surround it.

A fluxgate gradiometer survey undertaken by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory Geophysics Section showed that the ditch had only one causeway across it and the site is thus a class I henge monument; the bank, however, has been almost completely ploughed away. Two sections were cut across the ditch, one exposing the terminal on the E side of the entrance and the other on the SE side of the henge. These showed that the ditch measured over 4.0 m across and about 2.4 m in depth; the bottom of the ditch had been cut to a depth of 1.2 m into the bedrock. In the SW section, a thick organic deposit including twigs and animal bones (bovine, sheep, pig and wolf) was sealed by the initial silting of the ditch and a cremation deposit was found between the primary and secondary silting.

The circle had originally comprised twelve stones and, although the four existing uprights were not examined, excavation was undertaken in order to discover the disposition of the other stones; four stumps remain *in situ* in their stone holes, three of the stone holes were empty and at the likely position of the twelfth stone of the circle there was only a slight hollow. In the centre of the circle there was a square setting of four stones laid horizontally, associated with cremated bones and sherds of coarse pottery. No human bones have so far been identified among the cremated remains but animal bones are present throughout. A series of pits were found in the S quadrant of the circle, their contents including sherds, carbonised grain and a fragment of a stone implement.

The Stones of Stenness presumably formed an important part of the series of ritual monuments situated between the Lochs of Stenness and Harray in the great central bowl of Mainland Orkney. It is hoped that the date of its use will be indicated by radiocarbon analysis of samples from the organic layer in the ditch and from charcoal from the central area. A careful survey of the visible horizon was also prepared in order to test Professor Thom's interpretation of such sites as observatories.. Excavation will continue in 1974.