

The Ness of Brodgar

An Exploration of Neolithic
Orkney

Introduction

When I tell people I'm from the north of Scotland, they often think of Inverness, or even Aberdeen. They've never heard of Thurso.

So now I tell them, "As far north as you can go, without jumping on a boat."

But I've been on that boat. And what's beyond the frothing Pentland Firth, the distant Old Man of Hoy, is more wonderful than I ever could have imagined.

The Orkney Islands are expansive. The land is curved and majestic, rising to meet the sky. The sun peeks through the hills, making the water gleam and the standing stones glow. The flora is diverse, medicinal and scented. The waves crash over the roads connecting the islands, the spaces between host to the ruins of ships on which hundreds of soldiers gave their lives. The air is crisp and salty, rich in oxygen, lending to an abundance of lichen. The streets are cobbled and winding, the people are kind, the culture is alive. And so is the history.

Orkney is home to an abundance of Neolithic structures and archaeological wonders. In this essay I will discuss the recent 20 yearlong excavation of the Ness of Brodgar, and the ongoing post-excavation research.



Above: *The Ness of Brodgar: Trench P.* (Scott Pike) 2024

The Ness of Brodgar

For hundreds of years, the small stretch of land between Loch Harray and Loch Stenness lay largely undisturbed. A large mound, thought to be a natural feature (Batley. R, 2026), sat between the infamous Ring of Brodgar, and the impressive Stones of Stenness. And so, it remained, until 2002, when a geographical survey was conducted to map out the Orkney World Heritage Site.

The report of the survey described a "*dense cluster of sub soil anomalies...indicative of settlement.*" (The Ness of Brodgar Project, 2026)

As the team took the time to map out their next move, some physical evidence came to light; the very next year, the woman who lived on the land hosting the site noticed from her kitchen window, while peeling her vegetables, that her plow had stopped moving. She stepped outside to investigate, and discovered a huge stone slab with rounded notches, clearly manmade (Card. N, 2024).

Concerned that a potential Bronze Age burial cyst had been disturbed (Orkney is particularly rich in Neolithic and Bronze Age burial sites (Tait. C, 2018), the most prominent in my eyes being the Tomb of the Eagles, in which the heady, sweet stench of decay is still present), a Glasgow University Research Division arrived and began a 'rescue' trench to look for human remains (Batley. R, 2026).

What they discovered was not a grave, but the corner of a large building, dated to the Neolithic period. By 2004, the excavation was well underway.

Nick Card, the director of the excavation, walks us through the details of the discovery. He speaks about the Orkney islands fondly, explaining that the natural fertility of the land, the majestic hills, the abundance of both the saltwater of the Loch of Stenness and freshwater of Harray, creates a pull to that particular spot.

“You really feel central to the landscape in the middle of this huge, natural amphitheatre created by the hills all the way around...”

“It’s like a microcosm of the wider world where you have land, water, land, and then the sea beyond.” (Card. N, 2024).

The excavations revealed 36 structures, dated between 3,500BC and 2,300BC, spanning the whole Neolithic period. The archaeologists and researchers involved conclude that the Ness of Brodgar was not a domestic site, unlike Skara Brae. Rather, it was used as a ceremonial centre and a communal area. (May. A, 2026). Thousands of scattered animal bones (sheep, deer, cattle) prove that this was a place in which feasts were held.

The site has yielded over 100,000 shards of pottery, collections of stones with carved patterns - lines, crosses etc- and, most intriguingly, preserved paint pigment in yellow and red. This likely created *“a visually striking ceremonial environment.”* (May. A, 2026)

The abundance of art that the site has provided, more than the rest of Britain so far, will not only inform Scottish history, but British Neolithic history. (Card. N, 2024).

The revealed structures stretch up to 30 metres long, with 4 bountiful metres of archaeology. However, the site itself may be up to 300 metres long and 100 metres wide, stretching shore to shore. This is too big for a full excavation. And, unfortunately, archaeologists were quick to note that the stones used to build the structures were quarry stones. Flaky, and delicate. Unlike Skara Brae, which was built with sturdy beach stones and can withstand the natural elements, the Ness of Brodgar would quickly deteriorate. This year, after 20 years of digging and dusting, and just a week after I departed the isles, they reburied the site.

“The dig that rewrote Neolithic Orkney is now a green field again, and that was always the plan.” (Santos-Buch. G, 2026)

Had I known how little time I had, and informed myself of its historical significance, I would have made more of an effort to view it. But, alas, I missed my chance.

Conclusion

During my visit to Orkney, I was privileged enough to visit several Neolithic sites. Maeshowe and its Viking graffiti, the Odinstone and the few surviving standing Stones of Stenness, the glorious Ring of Brodgar, homely Skara Brae, and the Tomb of the Eagles, distinct with its sweet stench and glistening walls. It is a great sorrow that I did not see the Ness of Brodgar, but these experiences inspired my move to Wales, an equally ancestral land, to study archaeology, so, ultimately, I am inexplicably grateful.

I must stress the importance of the discovery: The Ness of Brodgar will surely inform studies into Neolithic life for years to come. It is the largest, most bountiful archaeological site in British

history to date, with well over 100,000 of pieces of evidence for future generations to study and learn from. I hope to be present for any further excavations they carry out in future. With at least 2 older layers of structures hidden underneath, and an expanse upper later still left untouched, they may yet choose to revisit the site. But, for now, the focus is on documenting, studying and archiving the treasures they pulled from the wreckage, as it has been for 2 years. And, with luck, many more to come!

Bibliography

Card, N. (2024) *A neolithic wonder on the Orkney Islands*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVyCLl5rwHA>

The Ness of Brodgar Project (2026) *The discovery - The Ness of Brodgar Project*.

<https://www.nessofbrodgar.co.uk/the-discovery/>

May, A. (2026) *Ness of Brodgar: Orkney's 5,000-Year ritual complex*.

<https://www.thearchaeologist.org/blog/ness-of-brodgar-orkneys-5000-year-ritual-complex>.

Santos-Buch, G. (2026) *The Ness of Brodgar dig closed in 2024 and was buried again*.

<https://www.pastpathways.com/scotland/ness-of-brodgar-excavation-orkney-guide/>.

Batley, R. (2026) *Rewriting Neolithic Orkney: The Ness of Brodgar | Ancient Origins*.

<https://www.ancient-origins.net/articles/ness-brodgar>.

Tait, C (2018) *The Heart of Neolithic Orkney: Mini Guide*

Orkney, Charles Tait

Image: Pike, S (2024) *The Ness of Brodgar: Trench P*.