

3. A Review of Prehistoric Housing in Scotland

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There are essential elements common to all houses - they provide shelter, warmth and storage space to allow survival of the family unit through summer and winter, through plenty and famine, through birth and death. The house both looks out-against the savagery of nature or external enemies, and looks in - providing space for the separation of different activities, public space for shared activities, and private space for personal activity.

The house can reflect the deepest beliefs and workings of a Society - defining men's space, women's space; and 'outsider' space where non-family groups could be encountered. They can illuminate the deepest mysteries of a culture - the houses of the Dogon, subsistence agriculturalists of Mali in Central Africa mirror their cosmology. Symbol and reality correspond and coexist, houses are divided into invisible sacred and profane areas, and even the activity which occurs in different parts of the house reflects the perpetual alternation of opposites which saturates Dogon belief - high activity and low activity, right and left, odd and even, male and female. A Dogon house is a skeuomorph of the patrilineal male who dominates Dogon society, the key to understanding the nature of their culture - but that understanding was revealed only by the anthropologists' study of a living society. It is unlikely that the excavation of a single one of their timber roundhouses would ever have suggested the depth and richness of this to even the most careful archaeologist. In this paper I wish to investigate whether it is possible to trace any of these elements in a study of Scottish prehistoric housing. Spatial archaeology is indeed a subject enthusiastically embraced by many young theoretical as well as dirt archaeologists, and is an area in which both dialogue and confrontation between approaches is occurring.

Space precludes a detailed consideration and no readily available text addressing the particular issues is available; but we can briefly survey the contexts and particular structures where the problems and challenges are or are likely to become acute. Two main Mesolithic sites have been excavated in Scotland - Moreton on Tay and Kinloch on Rhum. Although stake holes and Radiocarbon dates of c.6000BC at the former and 7-6500BC at the latter suggest that these should be Scotland's earliest house structures, the lack of understanding of what actually went on at Mesolithic sites compared to what we think should have gone on, emphasises an uncertainty as to whether we are looking at houses at all rather than windbreaks and work shelters.

We can still understand Mesolithic sites only macroscopically - butchering areas, knapping stances, external hearths - but, uncertainty of what might be the function of a Mesolithic house, seems often to have rendered them archaeologically invisible to the most earnest excavators. Even where the house is clearly definable, as at Mount Sandel near Derry, the interior does not yield its meaning.

Functional division and complexity appears with the early Neolithic long houses - porches, passageways, successive, stone defined hearths - and, also, monumentality, as in the long houses of the Central European plains and their possible off - shore counterparts, the Ballyglass house in Ireland, and the Balbridie house near Aberdeen, at 13 x 26m long our solitary example of the site type - enigmatic and still unpublished after a decade. We do not know whether these are domestic dwellings, community centres, temples, or the homes of powerful Neolithic lineages.

Domestic space that speaks to us is first audible at Knap of Howar on the west coast of Papa Westray. It is comfortable and organised, simple in concept but complex in detail,

having partitioned rooms of orthostat and timber, draughtproof entrances and a back room well provided with aumbries and shelving. The shelving is for practical storage and display, but also manifests a culture where solid structures are created for compartmentalising memory and meaning within a home. This is an essential element in defining 'civilisation,' and pertains to both the individual, and to the kin group or community. Evidence for its expression within the Neolithic community is eloquently available at Skara Brae on the Bay of Skaill, the most intact Neolithic village in Western Europe, and in the recent discovery of the complex at Barnhouse on the shores of Loch Harray a few miles away. At the former site, the needs of the individual and the community, their interactions and confrontations can be studied at almost contemporaneously vacated structures. Individuals select from a standard repertoire of stone dressers, central hearths, clay luted stone pits, and a bed layout where the adult bed sits to the right of the entrance and the smaller childrens' bed to the left. All seem to have access to an even more private inner cell for either lavatory or 'strongroom space,' perhaps both - 'wealth and dung aye gang thegither.' All, however, are linked and related as a community by the main passage, the courtyard, and access to the detached craft or work area of House 8.

Recent analysis of decorated elements and their deployment through the community suggests a cumulative focussing on House 7 with its curious structural differences from the others - its 'guard cell' controlling both access and egress, its ritual burials beneath, and the litter of bull skulls and beads across its floor, suggesting that this might be a cult house, a place of separation for initiates or menstruating females - perhaps only the dead ancestors slept in these beds, only their memorials rested on the dresser for the fearsome contemplation of the young. If the evidence is only hinted at here, interpretation becomes even more complex at Barnhouse - a settlement only a few yards from the gigantic monuments of Stenness and Brodgar. Here, amid a settlement of smaller houses similar in style to the early phase at Skara Brae, are two structures which overtly refer to the monuments around - one mirrors the standard fittings of hearths and bed recesses but with an almost machined constructional polish which can only be matched within the tomb of Maes Howe itself; the other, possibly its replacement, again superficially refers to a domestic house, but internal fittings have become enormous - huge hearths and dressers encased in a 3m thick wall. The creation of these 'templates' for the real world and its counterpart, are an element which can be fruitfully studied throughout the prehistoric period. Sometimes it is manifest, at others, only whispered.

The recent excavation of what disturbingly turned out to be a Neolithic crannog on the little island of Ellen Domhnull on Loch Olabhat, on North Uist, revealed a phase with an inturned entrance facade of stone slabs, surmounted by a palisade. The settlement is really only a small farm despite its longevity and island situation; but, the entrance, with no obvious defensive function, hints - however elusively, - at the chambered tombs around. We pass into the place of the living, as we shall pass into the place of the dead.

A polite reserve might be the attitude of many archaeologists to this, but the obvious intricacy of later prehistoric housing has been established for many years, taking a giant leap forward with the recognition that most of the 'secondary' structures which cluster around the walls of the major Iron Age brochs in the Northern Isles, are in fact primary and coterminous with the brochs themselves.

At the huge complex of Gurness on Orkney we find a whole village of wedge shaped houses huddled around the base of what must have been the seat of a powerful Iron Age kin - 30 - 40 families, perhaps 200 or more people. Penetrating to the heart of this lineage, across the double ditches, through the ramparts, straight to the massively lintelled door, speaks directly

of the circumspection which would have been required in approaching the power brokers of this community. This prudence might have been reinforced by the experience within the broch itself where covered passageways and smoky, partitioned spaces would have circumspectly brought the visitor to the central hearth, with the knowledge that, above one, were even further timber storeys, accessible by unknown intramural stairs and voids.

This monumentality, this desire to impress, can also be traced in structure after structure. It descends to the later Wheelhouses of the Northern and Western Isles, with their corbelled side chambers, and central hearths, their little side cells, and souterrains. Even when the later Iron Age inhabitants seem to have had to retire to the machairs of the west after the environmental shattering of the islands' interiors, they continued to build monumental wheelhouses, such as has recently been revealed at Cnip on Uist. They were forced to excavate large pits in the sand within which they could build structures which faintly echoed the efforts of their forefathers - the Atlantic Roundhouses - whose ruins must still have been reproachfully visible in the increasing desolation of the islands' interiors. As yet, speculations on the meanings of space within prehistoric houses have largely been restricted to Atlantic Scotland, where stone use has ensured that some degree of resonance, however enigmatic or distorted, has been preserved. For Southern Scotland, the immense availability of timber and the access to improvable soil beneath the cleared forest has ensured that the evidence is much more fragmentary. We can study settlement succession, from Unenclosed Platform Stances, to Palisaded Homestead, from simple Hut Circles to monumental Ring Ditch houses. We can also detect the sequence of ritual monuments, from Chambered Tomb and Henge, to Meldon Bridge type complex or Ritual Cursus. What we seem unable to do is connect the elements, still less to understand the maze of meaning which must have been intrinsic to the inner life of all these structures. The essential continuities must survive however faint the skein of allusion and if we may believe with Pinero that

'...the future is only the past again. Entered through another gate,'

then we must encourage the pursuit of such insights through archaeology, as being of equal importance to those of any modern analyst of our own society to future generations.