

# Between the Cracks

A Socio-Historical Context of the Runic Inscriptions of  
Maes Howe, Orkney.

by

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## Introduction

On Tuesday, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1861, an article was published in the Orkney Herald, reporting on local archaeological work led by one James Farrer, politician and antiquarian. Mr Farrer had been engaged in the excavation of several of the large Neolithic mounds scattered across the Stenness area on Orkney's Mainland Island. During this undertaking, a remarkable discovery was made by one of his associates inside the largest of these mounds, Maes Howe (also referred to as Maeshowe);

Mr Robertson was surprised and delighted by the discovery of a very distinct Runic inscription on the wall above the entrance. Additional characters were discovered on a stone in the course of masonry immediately below, and also on a large block of stone in one of the angles.<sup>1</sup>

Almost three dozen runic inscriptions were observed and catalogued by Farrer and his team over the next couple of days.<sup>2</sup> Not only were these the first runes to be discovered on the archipelago, they were also exceptionally well preserved, sheltered by the mound, untouched by wind and rain.<sup>3</sup> To this day, the Maes Howe inscriptions, determined to have been carved during the mid-twelfth century, comprise the largest known collection of individual runic inscriptions carved in stone.<sup>4</sup> No medieval sources mention the inscriptions; any knowledge of their existence seems to have been either unrecorded or lost until their rediscovery by Farrer. Translations and interpretations of the runes have been widely debated among scholars during the late-nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

After introducing Scandinavian Orkney, this thesis will present the Maes Howe corpus and attempt to determine who carved it, and for what purpose. Simultaneously, an attempt to deduce the socio-historical context in which these inscriptions were conceived will be made. Multi-disciplinary approaches to such an interpretation are essential, as runic inscriptions themselves often remain ambiguous as to the context of their conception. In this process, contemporaneous evidence is beneficial most of all, because it provides a stable foundation for comparative research. However, a possible scarcity of sources, combined with the occasional difficulties of precise dating, may warrant a broadening of the examined time frame to the twelfth century as a whole. Archaeology plays a major part here; by enabling a possible comparison between the Maes Howe corpus, similar runic finds, and evidence from local settlements and grave sites, details about domestic life and social environments in Scandinavian Orkney may be exposed. Another important, albeit less reliable, source for comparative research is saga literature, as Orkney also features prominently in the aptly named *Orkneyinga Saga* and similar contemporaneous literature. This type of literary source material may provide an impression of Orkney's political developments and local traditions up to and during the twelfth century. Specific details regarding the nature of communities, religious changes, as well as patterns of settlement and administration may be considered through toponymical research, which provides useful data on Orcadian place names, of which the majority are Norse in origin.<sup>6</sup> Combining these academic disciplines provides an essential resource when attempting to deduce the historical context of the Maes Howe corpus.

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<sup>1</sup> "Excavations at Stenness," *Orkney Herald*, July 16, 1861, 3.

<sup>2</sup> James Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions Discovered during Recent Excavations in the Orkneys*, (Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, 1862), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney* (Uppsala: Institutionen för nordiska språk, 1994), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Ritchie and David J. Breeze, *Invaders of Scotland* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1991), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Lars Dittmer, *Development and Demise of Orkney Norn* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2006), 7.

# I. Historical Background

## I.1 Scotland Before the Vikings

During the early Middle Ages Scotland had been subject to various intrusive forces. Settlers from Ulster had made their way onto the south-western Scottish coasts c.500 CE, establishing the kingdom of Dál Riada.<sup>7</sup> The Venerable Bede commented on their methods of expansion, which were either violent or by friendly treaty.<sup>8</sup> Archaeological and toponymical sources attest to the strength and influence of the kingdom on Scottish soil and beyond up to the early ninth century.<sup>9</sup> Some of the first Irish annals were authored by the monastic community at Dál Riada's ecclesiastical hub, Iona, as Christianity penetrated the Scottish hinterland under its supervision.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the Gaels of Dál Riada, the Angles of Northumbria had settled into south-eastern Scotland during the seventh century as part of their population movements on the British Isles.<sup>11</sup>

Significant portions of eastern and northern Scotland, neighbouring the Dálriadians, comprised Pictish kingdoms. Picts were first described by an anonymous Roman author (c. 297), who labelled them *Picti*, 'the painted people', referencing their alleged custom of tattooing their bodies.<sup>12</sup> It is uncertain whether these *Picti* the Romans encountered were the same people as the Picts who inhabited medieval Scotland. In fact, the Roman term seems to have been commonly applied to all peoples living north of the rivers Forth and Clyde during Late Antiquity.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, archaeology confirms the presence of the Scottish Picts by discoveries of 'Pictish' symbol-stones; decorative slabs with distinct artful motifs.<sup>14</sup> Evidence supporting the Pictish language is extremely scarce; along with some attributions to personal names and place names, several Pictish ogham stones have been discovered, distributed between Shetland and the Firth of Forth. The ogham alphabet is Irish in origin, and was utilised for producing Pictish inscriptions, whose exact meaning has yet to be determined.<sup>15</sup> Such inscriptions also serve as evidence of cultural interaction between Dál Riada and the Pictish kingdoms.<sup>16</sup> Missionary expeditions were undertaken by the time of Saint Columba (521-597), founder of the monastery of Iona, from which period the Picts slowly adopted Christianity.<sup>17</sup> The appearance of Christian elements on Pictish symbol stones confirms this religious development. But exchanges between the recent immigrants and Pictish communities were not generally religious in nature; the seventh and eighth centuries were characterised by Pictish rebellions against the advancement of Northumbrian Angles.<sup>18</sup> These were paralleled by lengthy military and political campaigns against expanding Dál Riada, to varying success.<sup>19</sup> The *Annals of Ulster*, in addition,

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<sup>7</sup> A.A.M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom, Vol.I* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1978), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Bede Venerabilis, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Bertram Colgrave (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 19.

<sup>9</sup> F.T. Wainwright, "Picts and Scots," in *The Northern Isles*, ed. F.T. Wainwright (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1964), 96.

<sup>10</sup> James E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2009), 258.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester: University Press, 1987), 39.

<sup>12</sup> C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, trans., *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 126.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Webster, *Medieval Scotland: The Making of an Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 14.

<sup>14</sup> W.A. Cummins, *The Age of the Picts* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), 125.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Forsyth, *Language in Pictland* (Utrecht: de Keltische Draak, 1997), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Wainwright, "Picts and Scots," 99.

<sup>17</sup> Cummins, *Age of the Picts*, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth O'Morgan, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 57.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin T. Hudson, *Kings of Celtic Scotland* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 6-7.

recorded several contemporary conflicts between aforementioned parties and Strathclyde, a Brythonic kingdom in the south-west of Scotland.<sup>20</sup>

## I.2 Early Norse Contact

It is this composite of Picts, Gaels and, to a lesser degree, Angles and Britons that the Scandinavians encountered upon their arrival in Scotland. However, despite Scotland's geographical proximity to Scandinavia, the initial recorded contact with the Norse on the British Isles took place much further south; in 789 a royal official of Wessex confronted a group of foreigners that had just arrived on the coast of Dorset. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes the men as 'Northmen from Hordaland' (southern Norway). The reeve summoned them into town, but was killed on the spot.<sup>21</sup> Less than five years later (793), a notorious Viking raid took place at Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumbria. The contemporary scholar Alcuin described this incident, not withholding similes;

'the pagans desecrated the sanctuaries of God, and poured out the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope, trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God like dung in the street'.<sup>22</sup>

This attack has been commonly accepted to mark the onset of the Viking Age. The *Annals of Ulster* describe 794 as the year of 'the devastation of all the islands of Britain by the heathens', which, although seemingly exaggerated, does indicate a sudden calculated surge of Scandinavian expeditions around Britain.<sup>23</sup> And indeed, Norse raids did characterise Insular Europe during the last decade of the eighth century. The monastery of Jarrow fell victim to raids in 794 and mainland Ireland was hit in 795 and again in 798. This stretch of hit-and-run pillaging would continue well into the ninth century.<sup>24</sup>

Scotland also suffered attacks during the final decade of the eighth century; sites in Argyll and Skye were often victims of incursion.<sup>25</sup> The Viking raids on Iona are the first accounts of Viking forays on Scottish soil. For the year 795, the *Annals of Inisfallen* note the simultaneous destruction of the abbeys of Iona, Inishmurray and Inishboffin, all insular ecclesiastical communities with no apparent means of protection against seafaring invaders.<sup>26</sup> Iona burned again during the second attack in 802, and after sixty-eight monks were slaughtered in 806, the abbey of Saint Columba was relocated to Kells in co. Meath, Ireland.<sup>27</sup> Vikings raided along the Scottish coasts and down its rivers, acquired riches, enslaved locals, and extorted protection money.<sup>28</sup> It is not unreasonable to assume that Scandinavians had established themselves in Scotland (specifically the Northern Isles) before these initial attacks, despite meagre evidence. The raiders were likely Norwegian, but the energetic frequency of the raids implies the establishment of refuge bases in proximate locations.<sup>29</sup> Literary sources such as the Norse *Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson support this implication, stating that 'in

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<sup>20</sup> Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ed., *The Annals of Ulster: Part I* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), 173.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Swanton, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>22</sup> Alcuinus, *Two Alcuin Letter-Books*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto: Centre for Medieval Studies, 1975), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 251.

<sup>24</sup> Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (London: Penguin, 1998), 194.

<sup>25</sup> Angelo Forte et al., *Viking Empires* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>26</sup> Seán Mac Airt, ed., *The Annals of Inisfallen* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951), 118-119.

<sup>27</sup> Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 263.

<sup>28</sup> Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

the days of Harold the Fairhaired [c. 850 – c. 933], king of Norway, the Orkneys were peopled; but before that they were a vikings' lair.<sup>30</sup>

### I.3 Scandinavian Orkney

The earliest Scandinavian enterprises on Orkney remain a speculative subject. Academic debate continues concerning possible contact between the island and Norway pre-dating Viking times.<sup>31</sup> Despite such speculations, literary and archaeological evidence provides us with some indication of whom the Vikings encountered on the archipelago. An early ninth-century source, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* by the Irish monk Dicuil, states that Irish clerics inhabited the Northern Isles until 'Northman pirates' caused them to abandon their reclusiveness.<sup>32</sup> The anonymous twelfth-century *Historia Norwegiae* adds that, upon the arrival of the Scandinavians, Orkney had been inhabited by both the Picts (ON *pettr*) and Irish-Scottish ecclesiastics (ON *papi* 'monk').<sup>33</sup> Although the latter occupants may well be associated with monks from Dál Riada, archaeological evidence for their Orcadian activities remains scarce. An Old Irish blessing, written in ogham on an eighth century spindle-whorl excavated in Buckquoy, Mainland, has been brought forward as evidence of Irish ecclesiastical influences in pre-Scandinavian Orkney, although it is unclear whether it was engraved locally.<sup>34</sup>

Orkney emerged as an important base of activity for its Scandinavian residents, but was probably only seasonally occupied initially, to serve as a refuge from which attacks on wealthy targets in the British Isles could have been carried out.<sup>35</sup> Radiocarbon dating confirms that at least a single Norse settlement (at Pool, on Sanday Island) may have been in use as early as the late eighth or early ninth century.<sup>36</sup> Systematic colonisation was probably not realised until the later ninth century, when Harald the Fairhaired, having united Norway as its first king, supposedly eliminated his exiled Orcadian opposition. The event is described in the anonymous thirteenth-century *Orkneyinga Saga*;

'One summer Harald Fine-Hair sailed west over the North Sea in order to teach a lesson to certain vikings [sic] whose plunderings he could no longer tolerate. These vikings used to raid in Norway over summer and had Shetland and Orkney as their winter base. Harald conquered Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides, then sailed all the way to the Isle of Man where he laid its settlements in ruins. [...] On his way back to Norway, King Harald gave Earl Rognvald Shetland and Orkney in compensation for his son.'<sup>37</sup>

Although modern academia largely regards this narrative as fiction hinged on Harald's domestic achievements, it recognises that a number of its historical aspects may contain factual nuclei.<sup>38</sup> The *Historia Norwegiae* claims that Rognvald of Møre conquered Orkney himself, a process in which king

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<sup>30</sup> Alan Orr Anderson, trans., *Early Sources of Scottish History: AD 500 to 1286* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1990), 392.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 31.

<sup>32</sup> Dicuil, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, ed. J.J. Tierney (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), 77.

<sup>33</sup> Devra Kunin, trans., *A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr* (Exeter: Short Run Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Forsyth, "The Ogham-inscribed Spindle-whorl from Buckquoy: Evidence for the Irish language in pre-Viking Orkney?" *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 125 (1995): 690.

<sup>35</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 265.

<sup>36</sup> James Graham-Campbell and Colleen E. Batey, *Vikings in Scotland: An Archaeological Survey* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1998), 171.

<sup>37</sup> Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Orkneyinga Saga* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 30.

<sup>38</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 266.

Harald did not even seem to be involved.<sup>39</sup> Orkney likely became colonised under the Møre dynasty, initially led by Earl Rognvald, who soon relinquished command to his brother, Sigurd. The *Orkneyinga Saga* labels him as the first earl (or *jarl*) of Orkney and Shetland, and saga tradition also identifies him as having subdued Caithness, Argyll, Moray and Ross. Following a victorious campaign against the Gaels of Dál Riada, he had their severed heads strapped to his men's saddles. Earl Sigurd supposedly died of infection after a tooth from one of those heads struck his leg.<sup>40</sup> Headhunting rarely occurs in Norse saga literature, but is frequently mentioned in early Irish annals and literature.<sup>41</sup> This peculiar instance of headhunting may therefore point to some degree of Gaelic cultural influence on the Scandinavian immigrants of medieval Scotland. After Sigurd's death and a short crisis of succession, the earldom was bestowed on Torf-Einar (c.900), the youngest illegitimate son of Rognvald, who established a line of earls that continued in uninterrupted succession until the disbanding of the earldom in 1470.<sup>42</sup> Orkney developed into one of the strongest players in tenth-century northern British affairs, with Shetland, Caithness and Sutherland all subject to Orcadian dominance.<sup>43</sup> Although claims of overlordship were occasionally made over the strategically important archipelago by Norwegian rulers, the local earls normally retained complete authority. In the eleventh century Thorfinn ('the Mighty') even managed to secure leadership over eight other earldoms in Scotland and Ireland, making him one of the most influential earls of Orkney.<sup>44</sup>

Hiberno-Christian monasticism may well have endured during the early Scandinavian settlement phase on Orkney, of which some indication is provided in the *Vita Findani*. This hagiography mentions the capture of the Irish monk Findan by Vikings (c. 840), who took him to Orkney. Here he managed to escape, being aided by a local Irish-speaking abbot.<sup>45</sup> Despite this possible tenacity of Irish monasticism, it would take until 995 for the Orcadian earldom to be (forcibly) converted to Christianity.<sup>46</sup> Lasting ecclesiastical developments became evident in the reign of Earl Thorfinn, who established a bishopric on the site of an earlier Gaelic monastery at the Brough of Birsay (ON *Birgisherað*) off Mainland (c.1050).<sup>47</sup> The absence of pagan burial rites and presence of Christian burial monuments from the tenth century provides some indication of on-going Christianisation.<sup>48</sup>

Scandinavian nomenclature in Orkney is overwhelming; tens of thousands of Norse toponymical designations are today still found across the islands. The vast majority of Orkney farm-names are of Norse origin, and certain elements, including ON *garðr* ('garth', 'farm'), *setr* ('pasture') and *bólstaðr* ('farm'), have been applied well before the end of the ninth century.<sup>49</sup> These toponymical references suggest a centralised bureaucratic structure; administrative centres of military character, possibly

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<sup>39</sup> Kunin, *History of Norway*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Orkneyinga Saga*, 30-31.

<sup>41</sup> John Carey, "The Obscurantists and the Sea-Monster: Reflections on the Hisperica Famina," *Peritia* 17 (2003): 48.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara E. Crawford, "Einarr, earl of Orkney (fl. early 890s–930s)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), Accessed May 9, 2012, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/49269>.

<sup>43</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 268.

<sup>44</sup> Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles: 850-880* (Oxford: University Press, 1977), 158.

<sup>46</sup> John Marsden, *The Fury of the Northmen* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1993), 131.

<sup>47</sup> C.A. Ralegh Radford, "Art and Architecture: Celtic and Norse," in *The Northern Isles*, ed. F.T. Wainwright (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1964), 174-175.

<sup>48</sup> Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 216.

<sup>49</sup> F.T. Wainwright, "The Scandinavian Settlement," in *The Northern Isles*, ed. F.T. Wainwright (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1964), 139.



introduced by Earl Rognvald, collected taxes (ON *skattr*).<sup>50</sup> These ‘Huseby’-administrations (ON *húsabýr*, ‘house farm’) also imposed naval levies. Although originally warranting food payments, Orcadian taxation involved monetary payments by the end of the twelfth century.<sup>51</sup> The classification ‘thing’ (ON *þing*), which was used for public court districts, can be recognised on western Mainland and may indicate the presence of an organised legal structure on Orkney.<sup>52</sup> Documentary evidence from later centuries reveals that aforementioned taxation and law were keystones of earldom governance on the Northern Isles.<sup>53</sup>

Archaeological excavations have identified numerous Scandinavian settlements in the Orcadian archipelago in continuous use until the late Norse period. Some of these had been established on sites of earlier Pictish settlements, suggesting a degree of cultural continuity.<sup>54</sup> Norse settlements have been discovered at Buckquoy, Skail and Saevar Howe, as well as the earlier mentioned Brough of Birsay and Pool on Sanday Island.<sup>55</sup> By the second half of the ninth century, Orcadian dwellings had become more than seasonal outbursts of Viking activity and displayed strong Scandinavian social dominance.<sup>56</sup> Farming settlements were established as large numbers of Norse immigrants arrived.<sup>57</sup> Grave finds suggest that entire Scandinavian family units functioned in Orkney, as the remains of men, women, and even children as young as infants have been found.<sup>58</sup> During this period of settlement the native inhabitants of Orkney abandoned Irish and Pictish and instead adopted Norn, an insular dialect of southern Norwegian.<sup>59</sup> This dialect had become dominant on the Northern Isles by the end of the ninth century, but seems to have maintained dependence on its Norwegian parent language.<sup>60</sup> Toponymical sources in particular have been a valuable source for linguistic research into Norn vocabulary, whereas local runic inscriptions (such as the Maes Howe corpus) provide only sporadic hints of this dialectal development (see page 11).<sup>61</sup> Having combined these academic disciplines, including archaeology, toponymy and philology, a glimpse of historical framework is provided which may contextualise the collection of runic inscriptions inside Maes Howe.

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<sup>50</sup> Asgaut Steinnes, “The ‘Huseby’ System in Orkney”, *The Scottish Historical Review* 125-1 (1959): 36.

<sup>51</sup> Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>53</sup> Wainwright, “The Scandinavian Settlement,” 120.

<sup>54</sup> Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, 161-171.

<sup>56</sup> Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 213.

<sup>58</sup> Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, 50.

<sup>59</sup> Duncan, *Scotland*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Barnes, “Orkney and Shetland Norn” in *Language in the British Isles*, ed. Peter Trudgill (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 352.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Barnes, “Norwegian, Norn, Icelandic or West Norse: The Language of the Maeshowe Inscriptions,” in *Festskrift til Ottar Grønvik*, ed. John Ole Askedal et al. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1991), 84.

## II. The Runes of Maes Howe

### II.1 The Passage Tomb

Maes Howe is the largest and among the most sophisticated Neolithic passage tombs on the Orcadian islands.<sup>62</sup> It is part of a small group of similar chambered cairns on Orkney, commonly known as the Maes Howe group.<sup>63</sup> Its structure consists of a stone core, encased in a mound of clay and turf covered in grass.<sup>64</sup> The mound is 38 by 32 metres in diameter and its elevation reaches 7.3 metres.<sup>65</sup> Its interior is accessed by a south-western entrance which leads into a passageway connected to a high central chamber with three side-cells (see appendix, page 45). Buttresses in the corners of the main chamber support the roof, which converges in layers to enclose the vaulted structure.<sup>66</sup>

Radiocarbon dating from the surrounding trench has placed the construction of Maes Howe roughly around 2800 BCE.<sup>67</sup> The structure is believed to be the culmination of a local cairn tradition, because similar Orcadian passage tombs (such as Quanterness, Midhowe and Cuween Hill) seem to have been built at earlier points in time.<sup>68</sup> The position of its entrance allows sunlight to illuminate the central chamber at dusk during the winter solstice.<sup>69</sup> Maes Howe's alignment, interior plan and dating are remarkably similar to the Newgrange passage tomb in co. Meath, Ireland, suggesting Neolithic exchanges between Orkney and the Irish mainland.<sup>70</sup> Finds of human remains from similar cairns strongly suggest that Maes Howe was originally constructed for inhumation purposes.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the distribution of these remains inside the tombs indicates that whole bodies were placed inside, only to be re-arranged or (partly) removed later, possibly for ritualistic reasons.<sup>72</sup> Maes Howe has been periodically modified until at least c. 2100 BCE, but further reliable information about the tomb's functioning before the coming of the Scandinavians is non-existent.<sup>73</sup>

The passage tomb was first re-opened in 1861, under the supervision of James Farrer. Upon thorough inspection of the interior, most of its contents were found to have been removed earlier, possibly by Neolithic dwellers or Scandinavian visitors.<sup>74</sup> No skeletal remains were found, save for 'a quantity of bones and teeth of a horse' in the cells and a fragment of a human skull, now lost.<sup>75</sup> The approximately thirty runic inscriptions were first catalogued during this expedition (see also page

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<sup>62</sup> Audrey Henshall, "The Chambered Cairns," in *The Prehistory of Orkney*, ed. Colin Renfrew (Edinburgh: University Press, 1985), 96.

<sup>63</sup> Graham Ritchie and Anna Ritchie, *Scotland: Archaeology and Early History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), 29.

<sup>64</sup> Colin Richards, "Monuments as Landscape: Creating the Centre of the World in Late Neolithic Orkney," *World Archaeology* 28-2 (1996): 202.

<sup>65</sup> J.L. Davidson and A.S. Henshall, *The Chambered Cairns of Orkney* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1989), 143.

<sup>66</sup> Euan W. MacKie, *Scotland: An Archaeological Guide* (London: Faber&Faber, 1975), 235.

<sup>67</sup> David Fraser, "Investigations in Neolithic Orkney," *Glasgow Archaeological Journal* 7 (1980): 5.

<sup>68</sup> Henshall, "The Chambered Cairns," 100.

<sup>69</sup> Aubrey Burl, *Prehistoric Astronomy and Ritual* (Aylesbury: Shire Publications, 1983), 26.

<sup>70</sup> Ritchie and Ritchie, *Scotland: Archaeology and Early History*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> G.E. Daniel, "The Megalith Builders," in *The Prehistoric Peoples of Scotland*, ed. Stuart Piggott (Westport: Greenwood, 1981), 43.

<sup>72</sup> Henshall, "The Chambered Cairns," 104-105.

<sup>73</sup> Colin Renfrew, *Investigations in Orkney* (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1979), 209.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>75</sup> Davidson and Henshall, *The Chambered Cairns of Orkney*, 145.

4).<sup>76</sup> Maes Howe was excavated again in 1954 by Professor Vere Gordon Childe, who focused on the composition of the mound and encircling trench.<sup>77</sup> Finally, in 1973, radiocarbon dating was employed by Professor Colin Renfrew to determine the chronology of the structure and surrounding area. Using this method of dating, it became evident that the southern part of the mound had been modified c. 950, under Norse Orcadian governance.<sup>78</sup>

## II.2 Runic Script

The origin of the runic script is shrouded in ambiguity; its earliest alphabet, named *futhork* after its first six characters, is thought to have originated around the onset of the Christian era.<sup>79</sup> It may have been adapted from contemporary North-Italic scripts, and was employed by Germanic tribes during late antiquity.<sup>80</sup> The elder *futhork* consists of twenty-four graphemes, and was likely designed for engraving in wood.<sup>81</sup> Its earliest known inscription dates from around 200 CE, and is Scandinavian in origin.<sup>82</sup> The *futhork* underwent significant modifications during the Viking Age; although initially being reduced to sixteen letters, it eventually comprised a complete alphabet based on the Latin model.<sup>83</sup>

The inscriptions in the Maes Howe passage tomb have been carved using an early medieval mixed type of the *futhork*, likely Norwegian in origin.<sup>84</sup> Below are the twenty-two characters used in these inscriptions, along with their transliteration equivalents.<sup>85</sup>

ƿ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚨ	ᚱ	ᚴ	ᚷ	ᚹ	ᚻ	ᚾ	ᚿ	ᛀ	ᛁ	ᛂ	ᛃ	ᛄ	ᛅ	ᛆ	ᛇ	ᛈ	ᛉ	ᛊ	ᛋ
f	u	þ	o	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	y	æ	ǫ	ø	e	g	-	

In addition to these characters, bind-runes, such as K (nk) and ᚦᚱ (tr), have been employed to combine two letters into single graphemes.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, ‘twig-runes’ (also known as ciphered runes) are present, which can be linked to ordinary runic characters by considering the number of diagonal lines on either side of their vertical line.<sup>87</sup> The appearance of both ᚦᚱ (ǫ) and ᚦᚱ (ø) has been speculated to be the result of early local attempts to differentiate between mid and low rounded vowels in Orcadian Norn, although the possibility that similar developments may have presented themselves in contemporaneous Norwegian should not be discarded.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions*, 14.

<sup>77</sup> Vere Gordon Childe, “Maes Howe,” *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 88 (1956): 155.

<sup>78</sup> Renfrew, *Investigations in Orkney*, 37.

<sup>79</sup> R.I. Page, *Runes* (London: British Museum Publications, 1989), 6.

<sup>80</sup> Ralph Elliot, *Runes: An Introduction* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>81</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: University Press, 1984), 419.

<sup>82</sup> Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, *History of the Vikings*, 420.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Barnes, “The Scandinavian Languages in the British Isles: The Runic Evidence,” in *Scandinavia and Europe, 800-1350*, ed. Jonathan Adams et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 123.

<sup>85</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 12-14.

<sup>86</sup> R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 48.

<sup>87</sup> Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 179.

<sup>88</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 52.

### II.3 The Runic inscriptions of Maes Howe.

The majority of the inscriptions inside the passage tomb are distributed across the walls of the central chamber. Three separate inscriptions, however, have been discovered on the walls inside the entrances to the north-western and south-eastern cells, respectively.<sup>89</sup> Farrer, in his original record, has made reference to thirty-two inscriptions inside Maes Howe, unnecessarily including several drawings and imperfections he mistakenly believed to be runes (XXV-XXXII).<sup>90</sup> Barnes drastically revised the inventory in his 1994 publication, removing these arbitrary scratches. In addition, he identified fourteen distinct inscriptions (11-14, 23-32) on single stones, previously bundled together by Farrer (XIV, XIX-XX).<sup>91</sup> Barnes' updated Maes Howe corpus contains thirty-three inscriptions. This thesis will employ his transliterations and translations. These are also provided in the appendix (from page 29), as well as lithographs of the examined inscriptions. Relevant transliteration conventions are also explained there.

The corpus exhibits a large variation of size and content, some containing elaborate cryptic messages. Many of these engravings, however, contain little more than claims of authorship, not unlike present day graffiti.<sup>92</sup> A general description of the visitors can be identified above the entrance of the main chamber (Barnes 1, Farrer I):

**þatirui~~kr~~...\*akomutirhirtil**

The middle section of the inscription is unrecognisable, as a piece of the wall has flaked off. However, the message is still discernible: *þat er víkingr ... þá kom undir hér til* ('that is a Viking ... then came underneath to this place').<sup>93</sup> The message appears to be an introduction.<sup>94</sup> An example of individual identification is found on a large stone in the western buttress (Barnes 7, Farrer XII):

**otarfilaræistrunarþisar**

The inscription is interpreted and translated as *Óttarr ... reist rúnar þessar* ('Óttarr ... carved these runes').<sup>95</sup> Although the sequence **fila** represents a somewhat enigmatic part of the text, it may be related to Old Irish *fili*, meaning 'poet'. Although Ótarr does not provide any further personal information, the interpretative value of this inscription is expanded if this potential Old Irish influence is accepted, perhaps here serving as a nickname.<sup>96</sup> A different yet more familiar character is discerned in a large inscription in the south-eastern wall (Barnes 20, Farrer XVIII and XVI):

**þisarrunar**

**ristsamaþr·er·runstrer·fyrir uæstanhaf**

**mæþ·þæirøhse·erate·køkr·trænilsonrfyrir·sunanlant**

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<sup>89</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 228-235.

<sup>90</sup> Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions*, 77.

<sup>91</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Barnes, "Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe," in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. Colleen Batey et al. (Edinburgh: University Press, 1993), 364.

<sup>93</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 64.

<sup>94</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 144.

<sup>95</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 82-83.

<sup>96</sup> Barnes, "Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe," 366.

These carvings state that ‘the man who is most skilled in runes west of the ocean carved these runes with the axe which Gaukr Trandilssonr owned in the south of the country [Iceland]’ (*Þessar rúnar reist sá maðr, er rúnstr er fyrir vestan haf, með þeiri øxi, er átti Gaukr Trandilssonr fyrir sunnan land*).<sup>97</sup> Although the author of the inscription remains largely anonymous, Gaukr Trandilsson is also found in the thirteenth century *Njáls Saga*, where he is characterised as a great Icelandic warrior.<sup>98</sup> The first line has been written in twig-runes, perhaps to strengthen the author’s claim to being an adept engraver.

The largely informal nature of the Maes Howe corpus becomes increasingly apparent when confronted with an unambiguous inscription inside the entrance to the north-western side cell (Barnes 10, Farrer IX):

**þornysarþ hælheræist**

Although Farrer did not provide any conclusive translation, Barnes confidently interprets the text as *Þorný sarð. Helgi reist* (‘Þorný fucked, Helgi carved’).<sup>99</sup> The relationship between Þorný and Helgi is unclear, but the inscription could be interpreted as boastfulness by the latter, who might have been a recipient of Þorný’s sexual favours.<sup>100</sup> Further references to possible lecherous aspirations are found in the entrance to the south-eastern cell (Barnes 21, Farrer XXIII):

**igikærpirkynænainuænsta**

Although the interpretation of this inscription (*Ingigerðr er... in vænsta*, ‘Ingigerðr is the most beautiful ...’) suggests a degree of innocent affection, the adjacent drawing of a slavering dog (figure I) adds a layer of audacity to this otherwise sincere confession.<sup>101</sup> An inscription exhibiting a similar disposition is situated on the north-western wall (Barnes 9, Farrer VIII):



I. A depiction of a slavering dog, as inscribed next to Barnes 21 (Farrer XXIII).

**ingibiorh·hinfahra·æhkia  
mørhk·kona·hæfer·faret·lu(t)inhermihgiloflate  
ærligr**

The final line of this engraving is comprised of twig-runes, similar to those found in Barnes 20, described above. Some scholars have therefore suggested a common authorship for the two inscriptions, although the usage of twig-runes seems to have been fairly common in Scandinavian Orkney.<sup>102</sup> This inscription is interpreted as *Ingibjörg, hin fagra ekkja. Mjörg kona hefir farit lút inn hér. Mikill ofláti. Erlingr.* (‘Ingibjörg, the fair widow. Many a woman has gone stooping in here. A great show-off. Erlingr.’)<sup>103</sup> A somewhat different interpretation of the word *mjörg*, translating it as

<sup>97</sup> Michael Barnes, “Maeshowe,” in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde: vol XIX*, ed. Heinrich Beck et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 117.

<sup>98</sup> Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, trans., *Njal’s Saga* (New York, Penguin, 1960), 84.

<sup>99</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 104.

<sup>100</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 148.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Ashmore, *Maes Howe* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1990), 15.

<sup>102</sup> R.I. Page and Michael Barnes, *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain* (Uppsala: Institutionen för nordiska språk, 2006), 35.

<sup>103</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 99.

'loose', 'wanton', or 'lascivious', has also been put forward.<sup>104</sup> This translation radically alters the inscription's premise as well as the author's attitude towards a suddenly less reputable Ingibjörg.

Whilst looking for inscriptions disclosing more about their authors' social environment, several texts of an overtly religious nature are inevitably stumbled upon. A striking example of such inscriptions is Barnes 14 (Farrer XIV), on the northern buttress of the main chamber:

**iorsalaminburtuhaukþ(æ)\*\***

Despite the illegibility of the final two characters, the interpretation of the full text is unambiguous; *Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna* ('Jerusalem-men broke this mound').<sup>105</sup> This apparent crusading reference is clearly mirrored in a different inscription (Barnes 24, Farrer (XIX-XX), found on the south-eastern wall:

**iorsalafararbrutuorkquh·lifmtsæiliaiarls ræist**

Here is stated that *Jórsalafarar brutu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls, reist* ('Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaugr. Hlíf, the Earl's housekeeper, carved').<sup>106</sup> The terminology and message of this inscription is remarkably similar to that of Barnes 14; the parallel between *Orkhaug* and 'this mound' enforces the probability of Orkhaugr and Maes Howe being synonymous.<sup>107</sup> This assertion is further supported by the identification of the mound in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, detailed on page 21.

Additional religious elements can be distinguished by examining personal names in the inscriptions. Next to the entrance to the south-eastern cell, a singular name is carved into the stone (Barnes 29, Farrer XIX(-XX)):

**simon**

This originally Hebrew name, Símon, can be traced to the Old Testament, and was subsequently borne by two of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ.<sup>108</sup> It gained some popularity in twelfth-century Norway, but is not recorded in the *Orkneyinga Saga* or related saga literature.<sup>109</sup> Another name of Christian origin has been left in the wall of the north-east cell entrance (Barnes 22, Farrer XXIV):

**binitik(i)rpikrospæ(n)a**

The inscription states that *Benedikt gerði kross þenna* ('Benedikt made this cross').<sup>110</sup> This unquestionably un-Scandinavian name (from Latin *benedico*, 'to speak well') gained eminence after numerous saints and popes took it on from the early Middle Ages.<sup>111</sup> This Benedikt, if the authorship of the inscription is his, claims to have carved a nearby cross, thereby advertising his Christian inclinations. However, no such cross can be found in the vicinity of the inscription, possibly because

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<sup>104</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 147.

<sup>105</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 117.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>107</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 144.

<sup>108</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Vol. 4* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 356-360.

<sup>109</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 204.

<sup>110</sup> Barnes, "Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe," 367.

<sup>111</sup> F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 184-187.

Benedikt might simply have forgotten to carve it.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the absence of this particular cross, many other crosses have been incised throughout the main chamber. Particular examples of this Christian symbolism are seven crosses accompanying Barnes 17 (Farrer XI).<sup>113</sup> The central h-rune (✠) here also seems to be embellished to resemble a cross.<sup>114</sup> Although the disclosure of this inscription is by no means unique ('Óframr Sigurðarsonr carved these runes'), the proximity of the crosses insinuates the religious disposition of its author (figure II).<sup>115</sup> Several crosses also feature near Barnes 3 (Farrer X), although it remains unclear whether they were ever intended to be associated with the inscription itself.<sup>116</sup>

Another theme seems to have been popular amongst the Scandinavian visitors of Maes Howe, as six inscriptions mention supposed hidden riches. A clear-cut reference to this wealth is found in Barnes 4 (Farrer XIII and III), on the western wall:

**þat·man·sat·er(·)ek·sæhe·atfe·u(a)r·fört·abrot·þrim·notom·uarfe·bröt·fört·hæltr·ænpær  
br(e)hōþ(e)na**

The inscription is interpreted as *þat man satt, er ek segi, at fé var fært á brott. Þrim nóttum var fé brott fært, heldr en þeir bryti haug þenna*, 'that will be true which I say, that treasure was carried away. Treasure was carried away three nights before they broke this mound.'<sup>117</sup> A possible reference to the same fortune can be discerned in Barnes 8 (Farrer VI and VII), a partially illegible inscription on the north-western wall, which states that '... is told to me that treasure is hidden here well enough. Few say as Ottr Orkasonr said in those runes which he carved.' Whether this is the same *Óttarr* that carved the runes of Barnes 7 (page 12) remains unclear.<sup>118</sup> Four possibly related inscriptions, carved on the wall next to the entrance of the south-eastern cell, can be distinguished. Because of their density, Farrer originally categorised them as one single message.<sup>119</sup>

Barnes 25 (Farrer XIX(-XX))  
**utnorþr:erfe·folhit·mikit**

*Útnorðr er fé folgit mikit.* 'In the north-west great treasure is hidden'

Barnes 26 (Farrer XIX-XX)  
**·þatuarlōkoerheruarfefolhketmiket**

*þat var lōngu, er hér var fé folgit mikit.* 'It was long ago that great treasure was hidden here.'

Barnes 27 (Farrer (XIX-)XX)  
**sælersærfinamaþanqūphinmikla**

*Sæll er sá, er finna má þann auð hinn mikla.* 'Happy is he who can find the great wealth.'

<sup>112</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 170.

<sup>113</sup> Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions*, 30-31.

<sup>114</sup> Barnes, "Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe," 359.

<sup>115</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 135.

<sup>116</sup> Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions*, 30.

<sup>117</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 135.

<sup>118</sup> Jean Renaud, *Archipels Norrois: Orcades, Shetland et Hébrides dans le Monde Viking* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1988), 61.

<sup>119</sup> Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions*, 70-71.

Barnes 28 (Farrer (XIX)-XX)

·**ǫkǫnæinbarfeyrǫhipisum**

*Hókon einn bar fé yr haugi þessum. 'Hókon alone carried treasure from this mound.'*

Not only does their content clearly link these inscriptions, their proximity also implies a degree of interrelationship. They were packed closely together on a wall which provided more than enough room for them to be spread out.<sup>120</sup> Their method of carving and spelling indicate that they were inscribed by four different people, perhaps as a form of dialogue.<sup>121</sup>

Having presented the inscriptions, a sense of the socio-historical context in which they were produced can now be deduced by comparative research, employing literary and archaeological sources alike.



II. Barnes 17 (Farrer XI) and its seven accompanying crosses.

<sup>120</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 135.

<sup>121</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 148.



### III. Interpreting the Inscriptions

#### III.1 Dating the Runes

A first and foremost matter of importance is to determine the point in time in which the inscriptions were carved. Without establishing a chronology, any subsequent deduction of historical context inevitably becomes an exercise in futility. Several early attempts at dating were imaginative by-products of runic interpretations, placing the inscriptions anywhere between prehistory and the eleventh century. Such claims have been largely discredited over the years.<sup>122</sup> The rune-forms of Maes Howe are strikingly uniform, implying that the corpus was carved within a relatively short period of time.<sup>123</sup> The inscriptions are philologically analogous to those produced in twelfth-century Norway.<sup>124</sup> Additionally, they morphologically match Icelandic manuscripts from around 1150.<sup>125</sup> The homogenous nature of the Maes Howe inscriptions combined with these similarities to their Norwegian and Icelandic counterparts suggest that they were carved towards the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>126</sup> The content of several inscriptions, specifically those concerning crusaders, supports and refines this dating (as described in chapter III.3). In addition, several drawings have been sketched into the tomb walls alongside the thirty-odd inscriptions. The most well-known example, the so-called 'Maes Howe Dragon' (as depicted on the cover of this thesis), contains stylistic features which indicate a twelfth-century origin, making it contemporaneous with the neighbouring runes.<sup>127</sup>

#### III.2 Identifying the Authors

Personal names in the Maes Howe corpus may reflect its authors' social background. Among these inscriptions, the reference to Gaukr Trandilsson (Barnes 20) warrants consideration. *Njáls Saga* mentions the demise of Gaukr at the hands of his comrade, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, during the late tenth century.<sup>128</sup> According to the (anonymous) author of Barnes 20, his inscription was carved using the slain Gaukr's axe, more than a century and a half later. Þorhallr Ásgrímsson, the man who captained Earl Rogvald and his crusaders back to Orkney from Norway in 1153 (as described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*), has been hypothesised to be the aforementioned Ásgrímr's great-great-great grandson, and the author of Barnes 20.<sup>129</sup> The axe must have remained in his family for generations if Þorhallr was able to bring and use the axe inside Maes Howe before returning home.<sup>130</sup> But even though Þorhallr may indeed have been Ásgrímr's descendant, whether he was actually inside Maes Howe or carved the inscription is doubtful. Although close analysis of Barnes 20 cannot disprove the use of an axe for its composition, employing a valuable heirloom for the purpose of carving incidental

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<sup>122</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 24-26.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>124</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 144.

<sup>125</sup> Barnes, "Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe," 354.

<sup>126</sup> Barnes, "Maeshowe," 116.

<sup>127</sup> Uaininn O'Meadhra, "Viking Age Sketches and Motif-Pieces from the Northern Earldoms," in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. Colleen Batey et al. (Edinburgh: University Press, 1993), 432.

<sup>128</sup> Pálsson and Magnusson, *Njal's Saga*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> Aslak Liestøl, "Runes," in *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World*, ed. Alexander Fenton et al. (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1984), 232.

<sup>130</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 157.

messages (thus ruining the axe) seems rather unlikely. Referring to the axe may have simply been a joke, hoax, or, because the inscription was carved by ‘the man who is most skilled in runes’, another example of boastful disposition by someone acquainted with legendary figures.<sup>131</sup>

Although several visitors to Maes Howe carved themselves out of anonymity, the content of their messages usually closely adheres to ‘X carved these runes’. Several names have been thought to correspond to similarly named individuals in the *Orkneyinga Saga*; for example, Erlingr (Barnes 9) has been frequently associated with Erlingr Skakke, a Norwegian landholder famous for crusading with the Orcadian Earl Rognvald (see page 20).<sup>132</sup> However, the lack of additional evidence supporting these assertions makes any possibility of positive identification a remote pipe dream. In fact, due to the likelihood of Scandinavian immigrants driving out most of the personal names in use by earlier Orcadian inhabitants, the names of almost all discernible Maes Howe authors (e.g. Qgmundr, Vémundr) were assumedly rather common in twelfth century Orkney.<sup>133</sup> This seems to be the case because toponymical sources reveal that only a fairly limited repertoire of personal names was being used by the Scandinavian immigrants.<sup>134</sup> Still, if the Old Irish origin of the word **fila** in Barnes 7 is indeed accepted, a certain degree of Irish linguistic continuity, perhaps through cultural assimilation, cannot be disregarded.<sup>135</sup> The isolated example of Scandinavian headhunting described in the *Orkneyinga Saga* (see page 8) may also testify to this cultural influence.

In Barnes 24, a woman named Hlíf identifies herself as a member of the earl’s household. This is the only signed female author inside the tomb.<sup>136</sup> Her occupation, *matselja* (translated by Barnes as ‘housekeeper’ or ‘cook’), is characterised as ‘a slave woman who divides the food amongst the household’.<sup>137</sup> Even though Hlíf may have attained literacy through proximity and interaction with the earl and his entourage, her inscription alludes to a remarkably literate atmosphere in which even women of very low standing might have been able to acquire the skills to read and write.

Several other inscriptions are also indicative of the learned milieu in which they were carved; parts of both Barnes 9 and 20 have been compiled using twig-runes, perhaps to obscure their message, but probably above all to demonstrate their carver’s skill.<sup>138</sup> Such flaunting is also apparent in the consistent use of bind-runes in the inscriptions. Although these sometimes seem to have been a necessity caused by spatial restrictions, they were more often deliberate aesthetic embellishments to showcase orthographical ingenuity.<sup>139</sup> In addition, Barnes 15, interpreted as an autograph, seems to consist almost entirely out of otherwise unknown cryptic characters reminiscent of (bind-)runes (see figure III and the appendix).<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Judith Jesch, “The Orcadian Links of Snorra Edda,” in *Snorres Edda i europeisk og islandsk kultur*, ed. J.G. Jørgensen (Reykholt: Snorrastofa, 2009), 150.

<sup>132</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 145.

<sup>133</sup> Gillian Fellows-Jensen, *The Vikings and their Victims: the Verdict of the Names* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1995), 33-34.

<sup>134</sup> Gillian Fellows-Jensen, “Some Orkney Personal Names,” in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. Colleen Batey et al. (Edinburgh: University Press, 1993), 397.

<sup>135</sup> Fellows-Jensen, *The Vikings and their Victims*, 33.

<sup>136</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 144.

<sup>137</sup> Edward J. Cowan, *A History of Everyday Life in Medieval Scotland* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>138</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 100.

<sup>139</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 146.

<sup>140</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 121-123.

These forms of writing exhibit a thorough understanding of the versatility of runic discourse among their authors and serve to signal a broader culture of writing in contemporaneous Orkney.<sup>141</sup> In fact, the twelfth century may have been a crucial period in the transformation of a primarily oral culture into an increasingly literate one.<sup>142</sup> This century witnessed the production of several works of Orcadian skaldic poetry, such as the *Háttalykill inn forni*, supposedly written by Earl Rognvald Kali Kolsson (c.1100-1158).<sup>143</sup> In addition, various finds of Orcadian runic inscriptions outside of Maes Howe indicate the steady emergence of a small but stable local rune-writing populace.<sup>144</sup> A prominent example of such an inscription has been found near Orphir on Mainland; the inscription is interpreted as ‘no church is as pleasing to God as [this]’.<sup>145</sup> Because the carving has been dated to the first or second quarter of the twelfth century and was discovered near the round church at Orphir (built c.1120), the stone on which it was written is believed to have been part of the original church structure.<sup>146</sup> The building was a product of local craftsmanship; the inscription therefore likely also.<sup>147</sup> Locals probably contributed to the establishment of the Maes Howe corpus as well; Hlíf (from Barnes 24) was feasibly such a local; her occupation, which included managing the earl’s farm in his absence, in all likelihood prevented her from leaving Orkney.<sup>148</sup> Additionally, *fyrir vestan haf* (‘west of the sea’), as used in Barnes 20, is an idiomatic phrase referring to the Northern Isles, suggesting the local origin of its author.<sup>149</sup> However, a large part of the runic evidence found inside Maes Howe displays a degree of linguistic versatility not found elsewhere in Orkney. It is therefore probable that the inscriptions are (at least in part) a product of imported skill.<sup>150</sup> Linguistically, the presence of Norwegians is attested, as several of the carvings contain characteristically Norwegian word forms, such as *som* (‘as’), *lapin* (‘built’), and *man* (‘will’).<sup>151</sup> In addition, the rune-forms of Maes Howe closely correspond to the *fupark* used in contemporaneous inscriptions from Norway.<sup>152</sup> The contents of several of the inscriptions confirm a Norwegian influence inside the tomb.



III. Barnes 15, consisting of cryptic rune-like characters.

<sup>141</sup> Judith Jesch, “Literature in Medieval Orkney,” in *The World of Orkneyinga Saga*, ed. Olwyn Owen (Kirkwall: The Orcadian, 2005), 15.

<sup>142</sup> Jesch, “The Orcadian Links of Snorra Edda,” 150.

<sup>143</sup> John Geipel, *The Viking Legacy: The Scandinavian Influence on the English and Gaelic Languages* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), 88.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Barnes, “Aspects of the Scandinavian Runes of the British Isles,” in *Roman, Runes and Ogham*, ed. John Higgitt and Katherine Forsyth (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2001), 108-109.

<sup>145</sup> Page and Barnes, *Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain*, 187.

<sup>146</sup> Jan Ragnar Hagland, “Two Runic Inscriptions from Orphir, Orkney,” in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. Colleen Batey et al. (Edinburgh: University Press, 1993), 373.

<sup>147</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 282.

<sup>148</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 214-215.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>150</sup> Barnes, “Maeshowe,” 118.

<sup>151</sup> Barnes, “The Language of the Maeshowe Inscriptions,” 81.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

### III.3 The Prominence of Christianity

Two inscriptions in Maes Howe refer to crusaders (the ‘Jerusalem-men’ of Barnes 14 and 24) and are often associated with the exploits of aforementioned Earl Rognvald Kali Kolsson. He and other Scandinavian rulers felt compelled to visit Jerusalem (c.1150) as its plight was propagated throughout Christendom.<sup>153</sup> That city’s influence on Orkney had by then already become apparent, as the design of the aforementioned Round Kirk at Orphir (commissioned by Earl Hakon) was clearly influenced by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>154</sup> Churches and chapels had been erected throughout Orkney by the twelfth century, many being paired with the already existent halls (ON *skáli*) of the ruling elite, illustrating a union of secular and ecclesiastical authority.<sup>155</sup> Christian influences on Orkney likely accelerated the rate of conversion in Scandinavia itself (from the tenth century up to the twelfth), as knowledge about the religion spread more easily via the Northern Isles than directly across the North Sea.<sup>156</sup> During this lengthy process of Christianisation, an initial group of Norse crusaders set out to the Levant in 1102, seven years after the papal call for the First Crusade. Orkney and Britain would establish themselves as regular stopovers for such journeys from Scandinavia and Iceland.<sup>157</sup> The most famous of the religious expeditions, referred to as the ‘Norwegian Crusade’, was launched in 1108. Sixty ships, led by King Sigurd I of Norway, dropped anchor in England before moving south through France, Spain, Sicily and Palestine.<sup>158</sup> Many more crusaders set out from Scandinavia during the following years, many dying en route to the Holy Land.<sup>159</sup> The pilgrimage to the holy city had become so popular that Icelandic scholars started producing guidebooks for the journey during the twelfth century.<sup>160</sup> In spite of their commitment, the Scandinavians were never a militarily significant element of the Crusades.<sup>161</sup>

According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, Earl Rognvald assembled his men on the Orkneys in order to embark on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem during spring, roughly around 1150. Among his crew were a host of Norwegian landholders and their retinue.<sup>162</sup> Several of these *Jórsalafarar* are believed to have made their way into Maes Howe either before setting off to the Levant or upon returning (c.1154), carving messages into the tomb during an idle hour.<sup>163</sup> Barnes sees little reason to doubt the validity of the saga account, as it was likely written no more than fifty years after the events took place.<sup>164</sup> If this link between the Maes Howe corpus and the *Orkneyinga Saga* is accepted, the mid-twelfth century dating of the inscriptions is further strengthened, as well as the presence of Norwegian men

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<sup>153</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 371.

<sup>154</sup> Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, 256.

<sup>155</sup> Judith Jesch, “Norse Literature in the Orkney Earldom,” in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature until 1707*, ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh: University Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>156</sup> Barbara E. Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney’s Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen: University Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>157</sup> F. Donald Logan, *The Vikings in History* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 28.

<sup>158</sup> Angus A. Somerville, *The Viking Age: A Reader* (Toronto: University Press, 2010), 424.

<sup>159</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 371.

<sup>160</sup> Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 218.

<sup>161</sup> Forte et al., *Viking Empires*, 372.

<sup>162</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Orkneyinga Saga*, 147.

<sup>163</sup> Renaud, *Archipels Norrois*, 60.

<sup>164</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 40.

inside the tomb.<sup>165</sup> It also suggests that Hlíf likely referred to Rognvald Kali as the earl she was in service to.<sup>166</sup>

The numerous carved crosses inside Maes Howe are additional religious marks having possibly been left by crusaders.<sup>167</sup> The authorship of Barnes 3 and 17 in particular has been connected to the religious campaigners, as crosses occur adjacent to these inscriptions. Barnes 22 merely references a cross although none is manifest in the immediate vicinity. A lone cross on the south-eastern wall has been associated with this inscription, but since this symbol does not appear in Farrer's original report, it may well post-date his excavation.<sup>168</sup> The crosses have not solely been interpreted as symbols of piety; it has been suggested they were intended as a religious defence against the folkloric *haug-búi* ('mound-dweller'). These were particularly unfriendly spirits of the dead believed to have resided inside passage tombs around Orkney.<sup>169</sup> This pagan notion occurs in Norwegian and Icelandic saga material and seems to have been introduced to the Northern Isles by early Viking settlers.<sup>170</sup>

Christian first names had become commonplace in Norway by the twelfth century but are absent from Orcadian saga literature.<sup>171</sup> Two examples of such names, 'Benedikt' and 'Simon', do feature among the Maes Howe inscriptions, once again suggesting the presence of Norwegian visitors inside the passage tomb.<sup>172</sup> If this involvement is indeed accepted, these visitors would, upon arrival in Orkney, have encountered an already thoroughly Christianised archipelago, its bishopric having been established c.1050 'by order of the Pope'.<sup>173</sup> In addition, many Christian burial memorials, such as rune-stones and hogbacks (i.e. Christian grave markers), were erected from the eleventh century onward.<sup>174</sup> Even St. Magnus' Cathedral, commissioned by Earl Rognvald Kali himself and dedicated c.1145, was already a prominent landmark by the time the Norwegian crusaders carved their inscriptions.<sup>175</sup>

### III.4 The Many Uses of Maes Howe

'Earl Harald set out for Orkney at Christmas with four ships and a hundred men. He lay for two days off Graemsay then put in at Hamna Voe on Mainland, and on the thirteenth day of Christmas they travelled on foot over to Firth. During a snowstorm they took shelter in Orkahaugr [Maes Howe] and there two of them went insane, which slowed them down badly, so that by the time they reached Firth it was night-time.'<sup>176</sup>

Harald's voyage, as described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, took place in 1153 whilst Earl Rognvald was on his pilgrimage towards the Holy Land.<sup>177</sup> During his absence, Harald and Erlend, both distant relatives

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<sup>165</sup> Jesch, "Literature in Medieval Orkney," 15.

<sup>166</sup> Ashmore, *Maes Howe*, 15.

<sup>167</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 47.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>169</sup> Ernest W. Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London: Batsford, 1975), 39.

<sup>170</sup> N.K. Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts: A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi," *Folklore* 57-2 (1946), 51.

<sup>171</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 204.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>173</sup> Adamus Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hannover: Hahn, 1917), 224.

<sup>174</sup> Graham-Campbell and Batey, *Vikings in Scotland*, 61.

<sup>175</sup> Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 13.

<sup>176</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Orkneyinga Saga*, 168.

<sup>177</sup> Ritchie and Breeze, *Invaders of Scotland*, 46.

of Rognvald, quarrelled over control of the Orcadian archipelago.<sup>178</sup> Harald landed on Mainland in an attempt to outwit his opponent when intimidating weather conditions forced him to hide out in Maes Howe. Although the saga account does not mention the carving of any runes inside the tomb, it is certainly not unthinkable that a number of inscriptions may have been fabricated during this unfortunate stopover.<sup>179</sup> Necessity caused Harald and his men to withdraw into the tomb, indicating that Maes Howe might have been regularly used as a sanctuary from unfavourable weather. This could, in fact, explain the informal nature of some of the inscriptions, having possibly been produced out of boredom during such an extended period of shelter.<sup>180</sup> At the very least, Maes Howe's appearance in saga literature is an indication of its notoriety among locals and visitors alike.<sup>181</sup> A certain amount of folkloric mysticism may have surrounded the tomb for contemporaries, perhaps prompting foolhardy visitors to enter on a dare.<sup>182</sup> Although tales of the nightmarish *haug-búi* inside the claustrophobic darkness of the tomb may have made for a less than pleasant experience, events leading to the insanity of the two men inside the passage grave can only be speculated on.

Earlier academic theories on the uses of Maes Howe were often implausible and have been largely abandoned; Professor Rafn, consulted by Farrer after his early expedition, conjectured that Maes Howe could have served as a sorcery-hall for the early Vikings.<sup>183</sup> George Stephens, English philologist, considered the tomb to be a 'fortress and place of retreat'.<sup>184</sup>

The Maes Howe corpus itself provides additional indications of its regular usage, albeit for motives unrelated to refuge from snowstorms; Barnes 9, publicizing Ingibjorg's fairness (see page 13), suggests that it was an everyday occurrence for mid-twelfth-century women to venture into the tomb.<sup>185</sup> However, if the opposing definition of *mǫrg kona*, 'lascivious woman', is accepted over 'many a woman' (see page 14), it takes little imaginative effort to identify Maes Howe as a cover for the sexual escapades of uninhibited couples.<sup>186</sup> In addition, the word *lút* ('stoop'), possibly referring to the crouched position required to enter the main chamber, can be interpreted figuratively to mean 'being disgraced'.<sup>187</sup> In *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, an early thirteenth-century Icelandic saga, the term is even used to describe the physical poses of both partners during coitus.<sup>188</sup> The supposed public notice of Þorny's promiscuity in Barnes 10 potentially testifies to such activity inside the passage grave.<sup>189</sup>

Inhumation of the dead inside burial mounds was a common practice among early Viking settlers, a pagan tradition imported from Norway.<sup>190</sup> Several of these Scandinavian burial mounds have been identified across the Northern Isles.<sup>191</sup> In addition, the modification of ancient (i.e. Neolithic) burial

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<sup>178</sup> Liestøl, "Runes," 233.

<sup>179</sup> Ritchie and Breeze, *Invaders of Scotland*, 46.

<sup>180</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 38.

<sup>181</sup> Jesch, "Literature in Medieval Orkney," 16.

<sup>182</sup> Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings: Revised Edition* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 21.

<sup>183</sup> T.J. Pettigrew, "On the Tumulus of Maes-Howe in the Orkneys," in *Collectanea Archæologica: Communications Made to the British Archaeological Association: Vol. 2*, ed. Charles Edward Davis (London: Longman & Green, 1871), 3.

<sup>184</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 24.

<sup>185</sup> Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, 147.

<sup>186</sup> Jon Leirfall, *West Over Sea*, trans. Kenneth Young (Sandwick: Thule Print, 1979), 66.

<sup>187</sup> Liestøl, "Runes," 234.

<sup>188</sup> Halldór Friðriksson, ed., *Sagan af Birni Hítðlakappa* (Copenhagen: Brødrene Berlings bogtrykkeri, 1847), 33.

<sup>189</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 105.

<sup>190</sup> Somerville, *The Viking Age: A Reader*, 110-111.

<sup>191</sup> Wainwright, "The Scandinavian Settlement," 150.

mounds (in Scandinavia as well as on the British Isles) for these kinds of burials is certainly not unheard of.<sup>192</sup> Maes Howe may have been subjected to such a modification; following his 1973 excavation, Professor Renfrew discovered (by radiocarbon dating) that part of the southern bank of the mound had been largely reconstituted during the tenth century. As serious intent for re-using Maes Howe is likely to have warranted construction work of this kind, it should not be ruled out that the tomb may have been used for the burial of a wealthy pre-Christian Viking.<sup>193</sup> As previously mentioned, a human skull fragment was discovered by Farrer upon his reopening of the tomb in 1861.<sup>194</sup> However, because its whereabouts are currently unknown, its age remains undetermined.

The hypothetical burial of a Viking may perhaps corroborate the runes' claim of treasure having been buried inside the tomb. Whilst Barnes 26 states that 'it was long ago that treasure was buried here', reference is probably not being made to the prehistoric burials the cairn was originally built for. Gold and silver could not (yet) have been grave-goods accompanying these early burials and nothing currently points to usage of the tomb between Neolithic times and the Middle Ages.<sup>195</sup> It is therefore unlikely that the tomb would have held anything of particular value to its first Viking trespassers.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, if such wealth was present inside Maes Howe later on, it may have been part of an aforementioned Viking burial.<sup>197</sup> Barnes 4 explains that this treasure was 'carried away three nights before they [crusaders] broke this mound', with Barnes 28 identifying the culprit as 'Hókon'.<sup>198</sup> Attempts at determining a sequence of events have been inconclusive so far; if Maes Howe was indeed used as a burial site by early Viking immigrants, Hókon might have known about its assets (by entering beforehand) and consequently made off with the treasure. This would have happened three nights before 'Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaugr' (Barnes 4).<sup>199</sup> However, if crusaders had to forcefully break into the mound, as Barnes 24 implies, how could Hókon have emptied it before their arrival? Although expectant academics have persistently speculated on the circumstances of hidden treasure, there is little reason to take its existence seriously at all; the inscriptions could very well be no more than fictional tales of lost riches, a common theme in Old Norse literature.<sup>200</sup> Scandinavian authors seldom hesitated to copy and adapt parts of familiar narratives to fit their personal stage, and a similar situation may well have occurred here.<sup>201</sup> The occasionally boastful and otherwise largely informal nature of the additional inscriptions also casts doubt on any legitimacy of the treasure beyond the imaginative.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Anne Pedersen, "The Jelling Monuments – Ancient Royal Memorial and Modern World Heritage Site," in *Runes and Their Secrets: Studies in Runology*, ed. Marie Stoklund et al. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 305.

<sup>193</sup> Renfrew, *Investigations in Orkney*, 37.

<sup>194</sup> Davidson and Henshall, *The Chambered Cairns of Orkney*, 145.

<sup>195</sup> Renfrew, *Investigations in Orkney*, 37.

<sup>196</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 38.

<sup>197</sup> Ritchie and Breeze, *Invaders of Scotland*, 47.

<sup>198</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 76, 199.

<sup>199</sup> Barnes, "Interpretation of Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe," 361.

<sup>200</sup> Page, *Runes*, 59.

<sup>201</sup> Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1991), 178.

<sup>202</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 38.

## Conclusion

The Maes Howe corpus embodies a fairly diverse array of runic inscriptions; whereas some contain little more than individual names, others, sometimes creatively encrypted, refer to legendary warriors, crusading ambitions, libidinous encounters, and the existence of fortune unseen. A share of the authorship is considered to be Norwegian in origin, although several inscriptions, such as one carved by Hlíf (Barnes 24), insinuate Orcadian involvement.<sup>203</sup> The sequence in which these carvings were produced continues to be unclear, and it remains possible that the entire corpus could have been carved during a single visit to the passage grave.<sup>204</sup>

Several authors, boasting about their orthographical resourcefulness, made use of bind-runes in situations where none were particularly required. This pattern, combined with the added use of twig-runes and other cryptic characters in the inscriptions, hints to a social climate in which education and literacy might have been prevalent, skills available to even the enslaved.<sup>205</sup> Multiple inscriptions also attest to the former presence of hidden treasure inside or near Maes Howe. Although such treasure was commonly associated with pagan sepulture, there are no indications, other than a confirmed modification of the mound during the ninth century, of Maes Howe having been re-used as a Scandinavian burial site.<sup>206</sup> The common theme of treasure in Old Norse literature, combined with the apparent mysticism surrounding the tomb for Norse visitors, casts doubts on these assertions of concealed wealth inside Maes Howe; they are likely to be taken with a grain of salt. In fact, it is likely that most of the inscriptions found inside the Maes Howe tomb are little more than idle graffiti, chiselled by bored individuals whilst sheltering from unsympathetic weather.<sup>207</sup> The near-contemporary description of such an unfortunate stopover, found in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, supports this claim.<sup>208</sup> In addition to this application, several inscriptions suggest that the tomb may have served as a meeting place for the carnal transactions of unrestrained individuals.

Despite the mostly informal nature of these carvings, a somewhat sincerer disposition is evident in the religious symbolism scattered across the interior of the tomb.<sup>209</sup> Various crosses, possibly carved out of piety or as protection against folklorist entities, denote a strong Christian mind-set in those who carved them. The crosses are commonly associated with Earl Rognvald's famous expedition to Jerusalem (c.1150), possibly also referred to in Barnes 14 and 24. Embarking on pilgrimages of this kind suggests a growing Orcadian affinity for the Holy Sepulchre, and the design of the former Round Kirk of Orphir is another example of this Jerusalemite influence.<sup>210</sup>

The Maes Howe inscriptions, combined with contemporaneous evidence from various academic disciplines, provide a small glimpse into the world of a twelfth-century Scandinavian populace. Although many specific details concerning the identity and social environment of their authors remain obscured, new insights may still be obtained through forthcoming (comparative) research.

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<sup>203</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 45.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>205</sup> Jesch, "Literature in Medieval Orkney," 15.

<sup>206</sup> Renfrew, *Investigations in Orkney*, 37.

<sup>207</sup> Barnes, "Aspects of the Scandinavian Runes of the British Isles," 109.

<sup>208</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, *Orkneyinga Saga*, 168.

<sup>209</sup> Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 38.

<sup>210</sup> Katherine Holman, *The Northern Conquest: Vikings in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007), 57.



Maes Howe and its wealth of inscriptions remain thoroughly established ingredients of Orkney's abundant historical landscape, one that many Orcadians feel strongly connected to, even today.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Leirfall, *West Over Sea*, 46.

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## Appendix – The Maes Howe Inscriptions.

This section presents the lithographs of the individual inscriptions mentioned in this thesis, accompanied by their transliterations and translations.

Because of their accuracy, the lithographs from Farrer's 1862 publication (see bibliography) have been used to represent the inscriptions. His translations, however, have not been included here, as they have been largely discredited over the years. Barnes' transliterations are presented in bold underneath each drawing. Underlined text indicates the usage of bind-runes. Parentheses indicate 'best guesses' for uncertain runes. An asterisk indicates runes illegible but still countable, whereas an ellipsis indicates runes both illegible and uncountable.

### Barnes 1 (Farrer I)



**Þat iruikink... \*akomutirhirtil**

*þat er víkingr ... þá kom undir hér til.*

'That is a viking/Víkingr ... then came underneath to this place'

Barnes 3 (Farrer X)

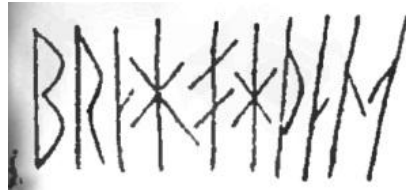


**þorirfomir**

*þórir fómir*

'þórir ...' (likely a nickname)

**Barnes 4 (Farrer XIII and III)**



**þat·man·sat·er(·)ek·sæhe·atfe·u(a)r·fðrt·abrot·þrim·notom·ua  
rfe·brðt·fðrt·hæltr·ænþæir**

**br(e)hðhþ(e)na**

*þat man satt, er ek segi, at fé var færð á brott. Þrim nóttum var fé brott færð, heldr en þeir bryti haug þenna.*

'That will be true which I say, that treasure was carried away. Treasure was carried away three nights before they broke this mound'

N.B. Runes are inscribed right-to-left in the first line. This is corrected in the transliteration.

**Barnes 7 (Farrer XII)**



otarflaræistrunarþisar

*Óttarr ... reist rúnar þessar.*

'Óttarr ... carved these runes.'

**Barnes 8 (Farrer VI and VII)**



... h(a)\*r m\*r(s)\*\*t(a) t f\*\*r\*\*r f\* l\*\*t\*r\*(t) u(i) l s æ h i a f\*\*r s o m(o) t r

o r k a s o n r s a h þ i a r u n o m þ æ i m i r h a n r i s t \*

*... ga er mér sagt at fé er hér folgit ærit vel. Segja fáir sem Oddr Orkasonr sagði á rúnum þeim er hann reist.*

'... is told to me that treasure is hidden here well enough. Few say as Oddr Orkansonr did in those runes which he carved.'



**Barnes 9 (Farrer VIII)**



**ingibiorh·hinfahra·æhkia  
mǫrhk·kona·hæfer·faret·lu(t)inhermihgiloflate  
2/4 3/5 1/4 2/3 3/6 3/5 (Twig-runes)**

*Ingibjörg, hin fagra ekkja. Mǫrg kona hefir farit lút inn hér. Mikill ofláti. Erlingr.*

‘Ingibjörg, the fair widow. Many a woman has gone stooping in here. A great show-off. Erlingr.’

**Barnes 10 (Farrer IX)**

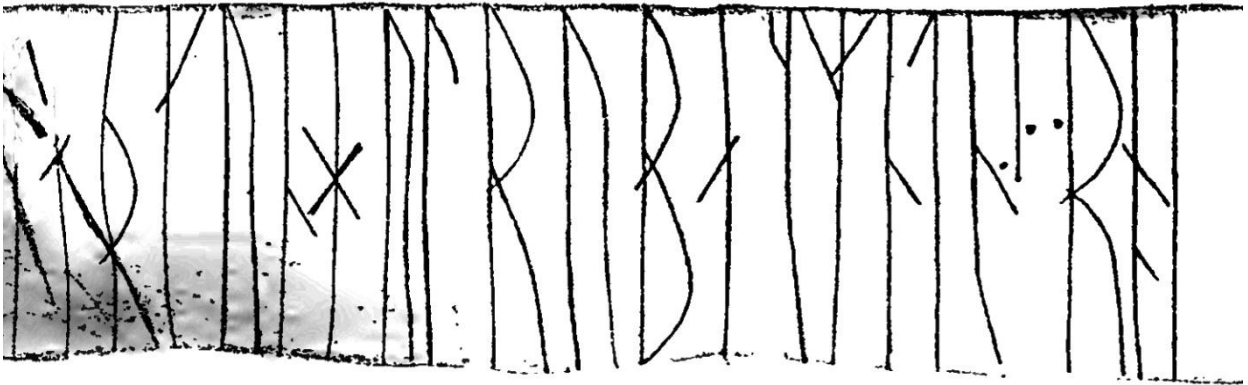


**þornysarþ hælheræist**

*þorný sarð. Helgi reist.*

‘þorný fucked. Helgi carved.’

**Barnes 14 (Farrer XIV)**



**i o r s a l a m i n b u r t u h a u k þ (æ) \* \***

*Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna.*

‘Jerusalem men broke this mound.’

N.B. Runes are inscribed right-to-left. This is corrected in the transliteration. Barnes 13 collides with the final three characters of this inscription.

**Barnes 15 (Farrer XXII)**



**\* x \* \* r x y i s \* x \* \* y x \* \* s y x**

**\* r \* \* \* r æ i s t r u n a r þ e s a r**

*... reist rúnar þessar.*

‘... carved these runes.’

N.B. Most runes in this inscription have been logically substituted by cryptic rune-like characters.

**Barnes 17 (Farrer XI)**



**ræistrunarpæsar  
oframrsihurþarsonr**

*Óframr Sigurðarsonr reist rúnar þessar.*

'Óframr Sigurðarsonr carved these runes.'

**Barnes 20 (Farrer XVIII and XVI)**



**3/3 2/3 2/5 2/4 3/5 3/5 3/2 2/2 2/4 3/5** (Twig-runes)

**ristsa 1/3 a þ r · e r · r u n s t r e r · f y r i r**

**u æ s t a n h a f**

**m æ þ · þ æ i r i ø h s e · e r a t e · k ø k r · t r æ n i l s o n r f y r i r · s u n a n l a n t**

*Þessar rúnar reist sá maðr, er rúnstr er fyrir vestan haf, með þeiri øxi, er átti Gaukr Trandilssonr fyrir sunnan land.*

'The man who is most skilled in runes west of the ocean carved these runes with the axe which Gaukr Trandilssonr owned in the south of the country.'

N.B. This inscription is carved into two separate (adjacent) stones.

**Barnes 21 (Farrer XXIII)**



**igikærþirkynænainuænsta**

*Ingigerðr er ... in vænsta.*

‘Ingigerðr is the most beautiful ...’

**Barnes 22 (Farrer XXIV)**



**binititk(i)rþikrossþæ(n)a**

*Benedikt gerði kross þenna.*

‘Benedikt made this cross.’

**Barnes 24 (Farrer (XIX-XX))**



**iorsalafararbrutuorkquh·lifmtsæiliaiarls  
ræist**

*Jórsalafarar brutu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls, reist.*

*'Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaug. Hlíf, the Earl's housekeeper, carved.'*

**Barnes 25 (Farrer XIX(-XX))**



**utnorþr:erfe·folhit·mikit**

*Útnorðr er fé folgit mikit*

*'In the north-west great treasure is hidden.'*

**Barnes 26 (Farrer XIX-XX)**



**·patuar lqkoerheruarfefolhketmiket**

*pat var lqngu, er hér var fé folgit mikit.*

‘It was long ago that great treasure was hidden here.’

**Barnes 27 (Farrer (XIX-)XX)**



**sælersaerfinamaþanqubhinmikla**

*Sæll er sá, er finna má þann auð hinn mikla*

‘Happy is he who can find the great wealth.’

**Barnes 28 (Farrer (XIX-XX))**



· q k o n æ i n b a r f e y r q u h i þ i s u m

*Hókon einn bar fé yr haugi þessum.*

‘Hókon alone carried treasure from this mound.’

**Barnes 29 (Farrer XIX(-XX))**

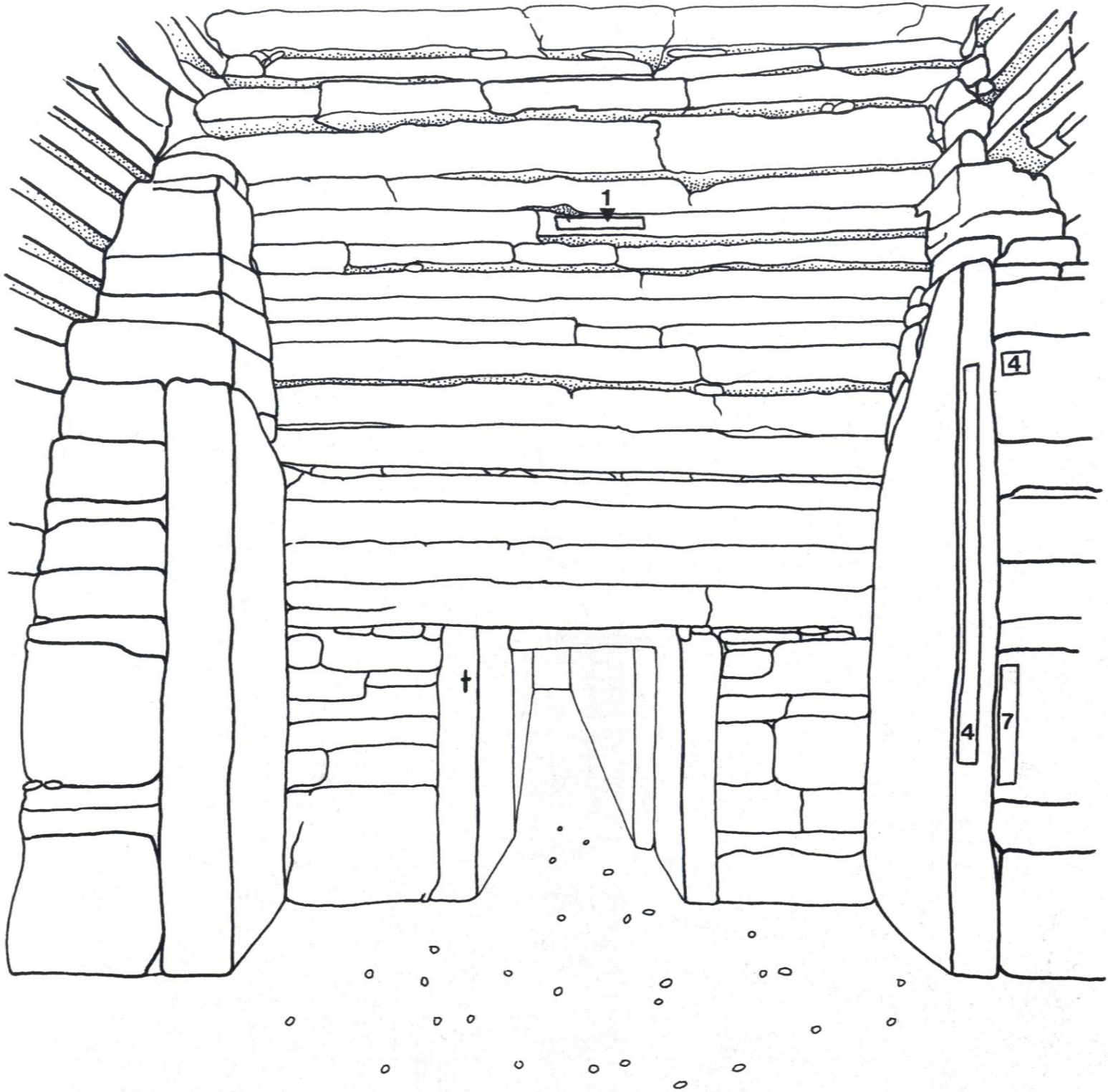


s i m o n

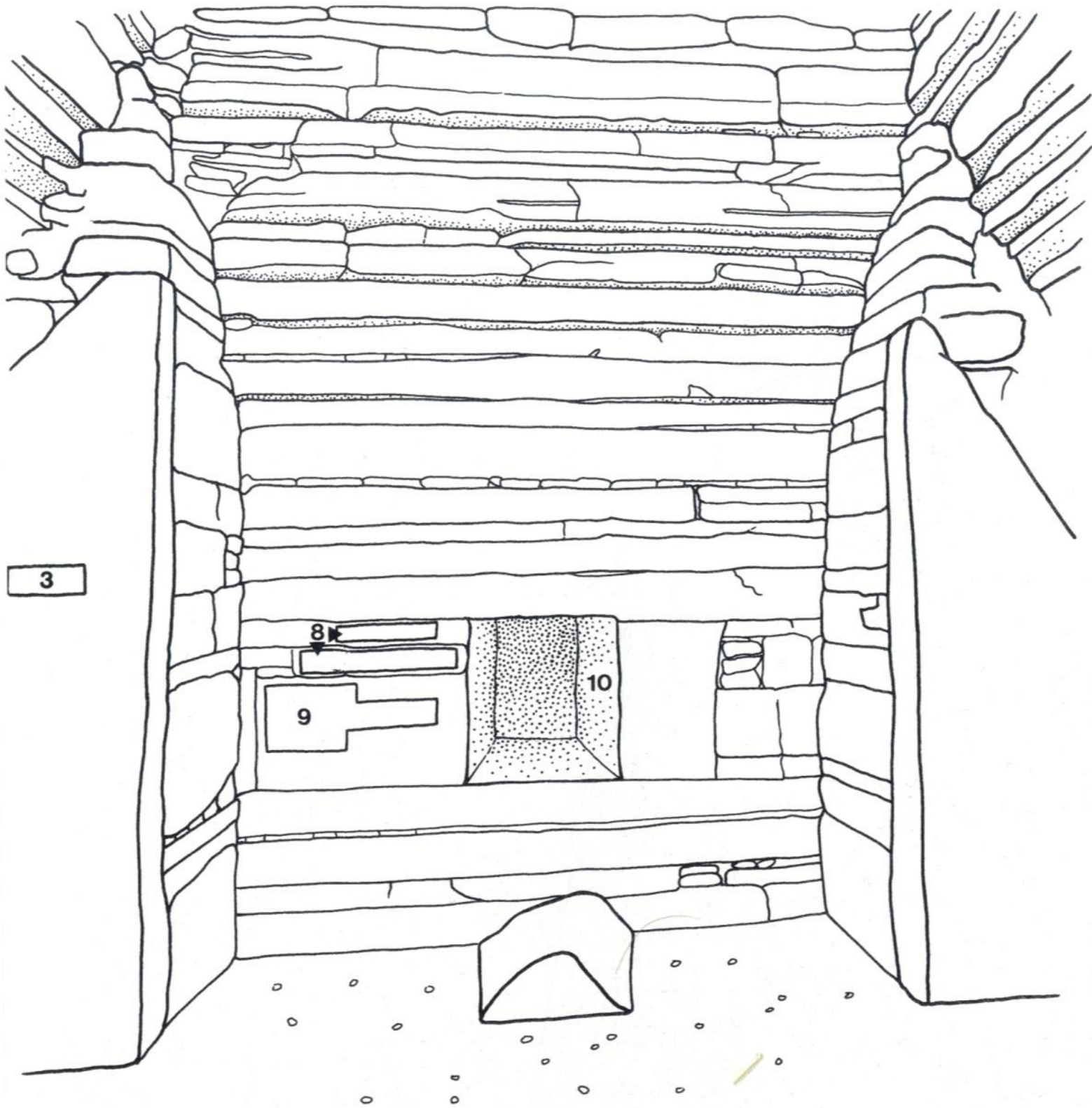
*Símon.*

‘Simon.’



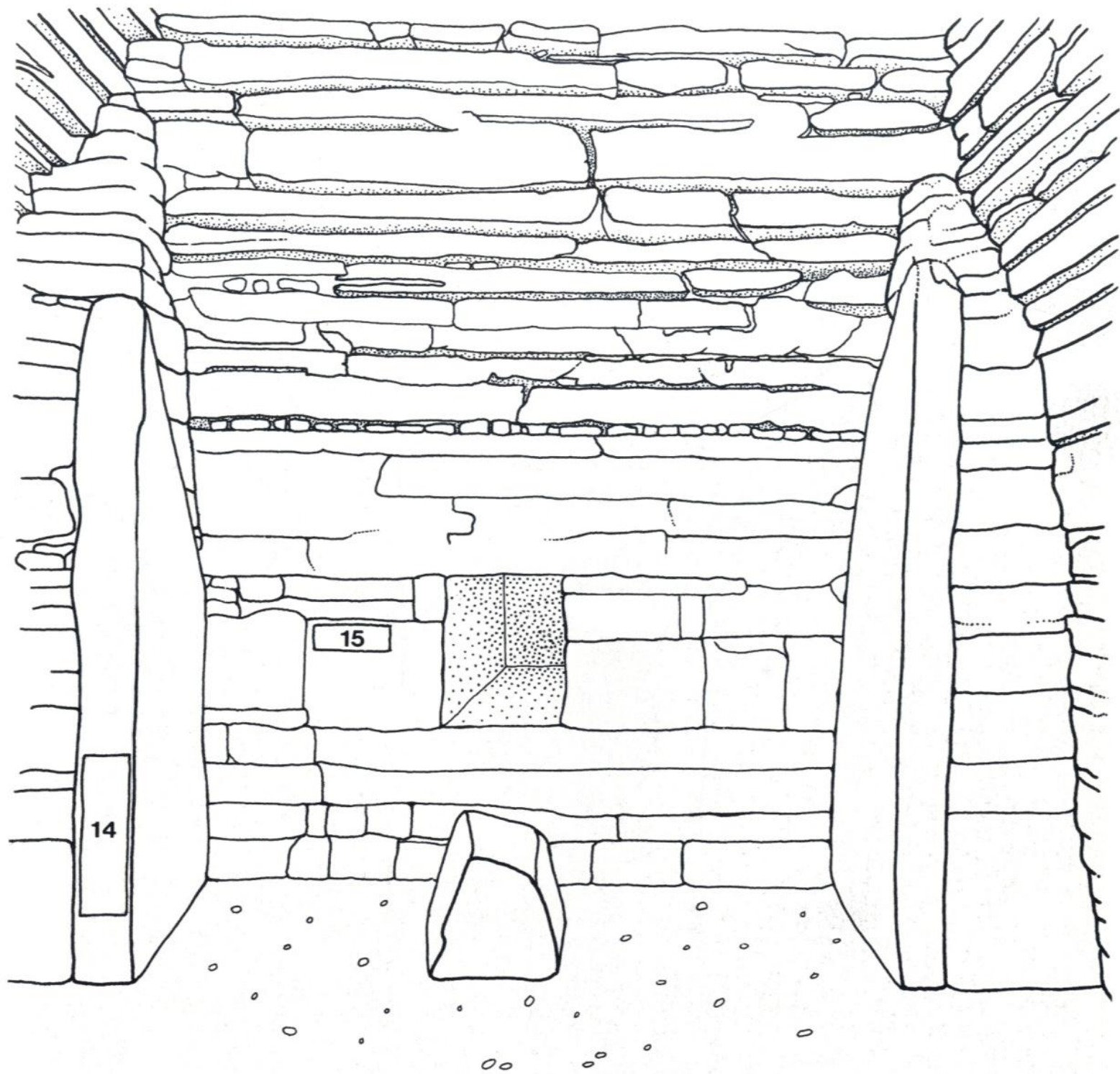


The central chamber, facing south-west, with positions of the inscriptions indicated.

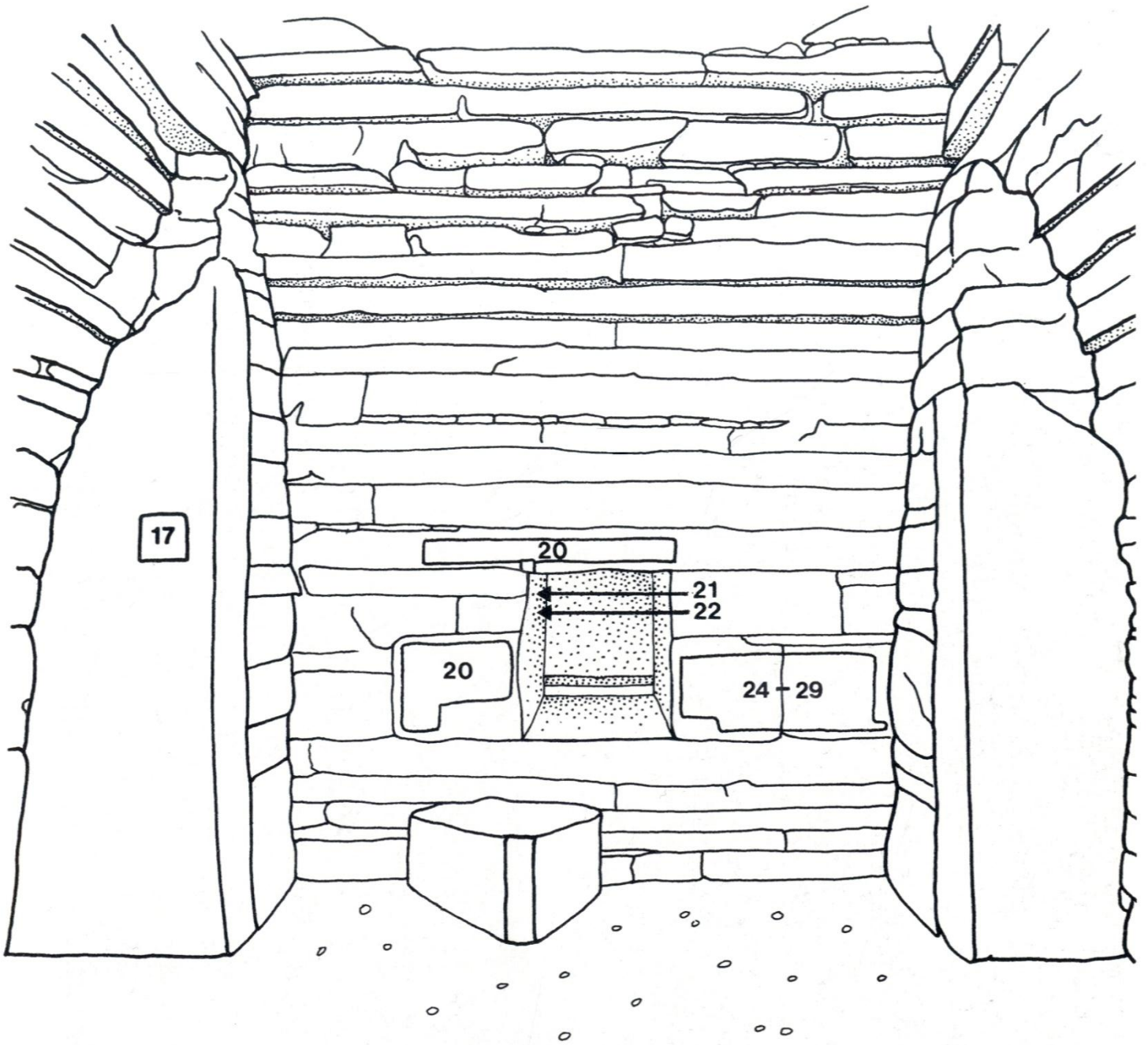


The central chamber, facing north-west, with positions of the inscriptions indicated.

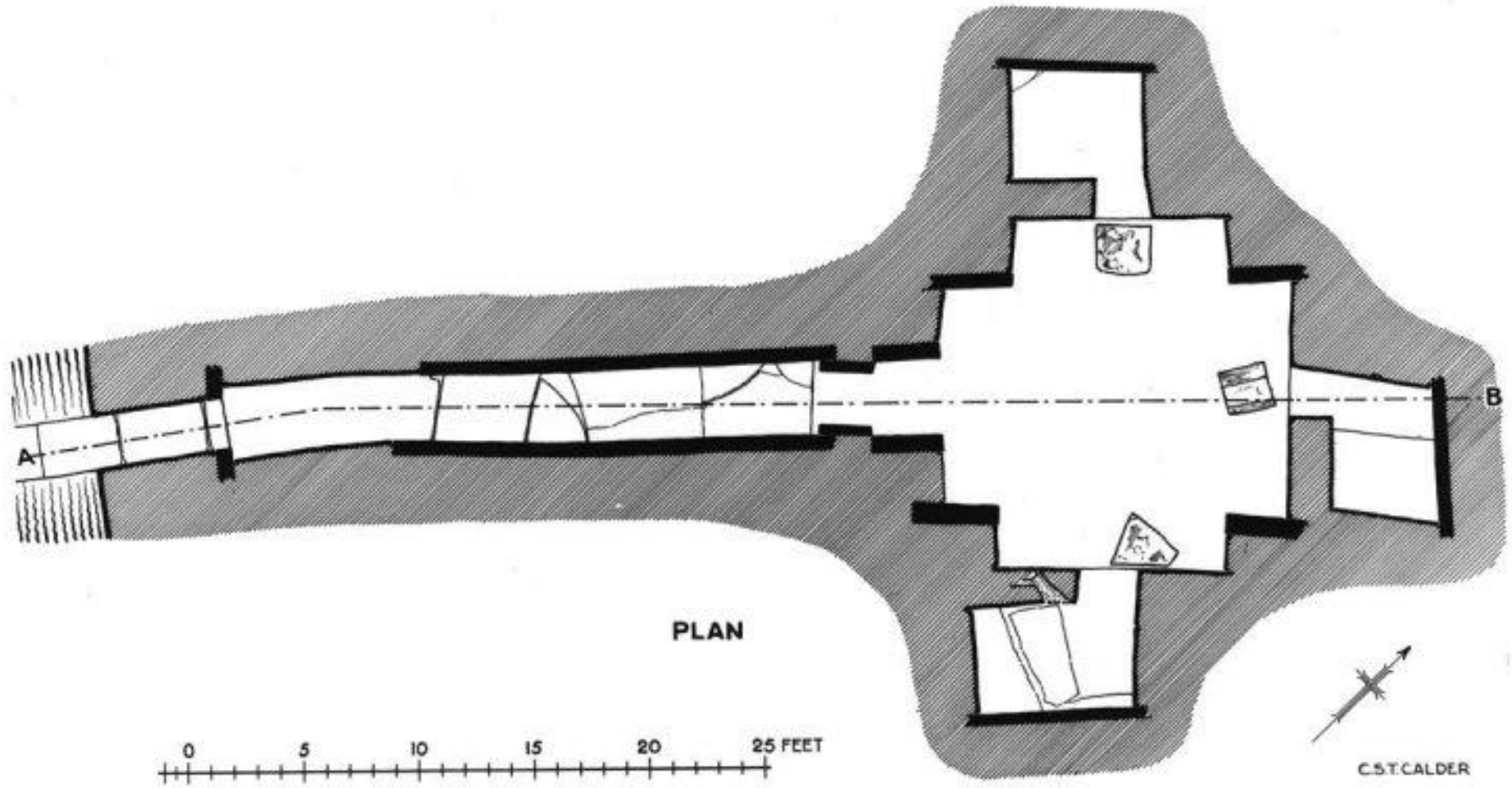




The central chamber, facing north-east, with positions of the inscriptions indicated.



The central chamber, facing south-east, with positions of the inscriptions indicated.



Interior plan of the Maes Howe passage tomb. Produced by C.S.T Calder, date unknown.

