

MVAC at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

# ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

CONNECTING THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

After a busy 2024, MVAC's hardworking staff are already having a busy 2025! Last year our field crews worked on contract projects—finding and evaluating sites and monitoring construction in sensitive areas— from April into December. This year we started even earlier, with monitoring already underway in January.

We're fully engaged with the rest of MVAC's mission as well. Our online and in-person outreach activities have continued, benefiting community members in a wide range of settings. And we've also helped undergraduate students and recent graduates gain experience and develop their career skills.

In 2025 we'll have new entries in our UWL Archaeology Alumni Podcast series, featuring former archaeology students talking about their experiences at UWL and MVAC, what they're doing now, and any thoughts for future students/ archaeologists. We'll also be producing new videos, adding more events, and continuing a full range of other activities. You can stay informed through our website, Facebook page, and monthly e-News.

And we hope you'll enjoy this issue's special feature: Connie Arzigian's account of her trip to the remarkable Ness of Brodgar.

## EVENTS

Upcoming activities for 2025 include:

**March 1, 2025:** Artifact Show

**April 3, 2025:** Presentation on local urban archaeology by Kathy Stevenson and other MVAC staff

**May 3, 2025:** Volunteer Field Survey

**Fall 2025:** Presentation by Amy Nicodemus, UWL Dept. of Archaeology & Anthropology: "The Rise of Bronze Age Societies: A View from the Maros Culture"

## MVAC AVAILABILITY

MVAC is usually open during regular business hours, but if you would like to visit, we recommend emailing or leaving a voicemail in advance to make sure someone will be available (mvac@uwlax.edu or 608.785.8463).



MVAC staff monitoring construction in January.

*Archaeology News is a publication of the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center.*

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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN ORKNEY, SCOTLAND—VISITING THE NESS OF BRODGAR

CONNIE ARZIGIAN

In July of 2024 I had the wonderful opportunity to travel to Scotland with my friend Diane and her husband Craig. We took an archaeology tour of Shetland and Orkney islands at the northern end of the United Kingdom. We visited some amazing sites from the last 6000+ years, mainly from the Neolithic, Viking, and Medieval periods. My favorite—and the reason we went in 2024—was to see the Ness of Brodgar in the last year of excavation. The Ness is unique, a Neolithic center of monumental construction lasting over 1200 years, set on an isthmus and surrounded by stone circles and tombs. It was unknown before 2004, when discovery of a delicately incised stone, along with some geophysical survey, suggested there was a lot going on underground. Twenty years of excavations have now uncovered almost 40 structures of unmatched size, complexity, and careful drystone wall construction. Structures were built, remodeled, and abandoned, with new buildings constructed over them—often made of stones salvaged from the earlier buildings—creating a complex site that will take the excavators years to analyze fully. They therefore decided to close the site and backfill it to protect it for the future while continuing the laboratory analysis and interpretation.

Although not recognized until 2004, the Ness of Brodgar had been occupied for centuries before the construction of surrounding ceremonial structures including the Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar, and Maeshowe—well-known sites that form the UNESCO World Heritage Heart of Neolithic Orkney. Why was the Ness here, on a narrow plot of land? The excavators

suggest that the landscape might have served as an initial focal point: two large bodies of water, one salty and one fresh, with an isthmus of land running between them, all set within a large bowl formed by surrounding hills, offering a unique representation of earth, sea, and sky. The isthmus connects the southern and northern halves of the Orkney Mainland, so it would have been an important travel route through time.

What was life like 5,000 years ago? The people were farmers who grew barley and wheat, but their main subsistence may have been cattle that grazed on the surrounding land, much as sheep still do today. Sheep, pigs, and dogs were all present, and red deer were hunted occasionally. Surprisingly little fish is represented, unlike in Orkney sites of the earlier Mesolithic period. The main occupation of the Ness was from about 3300 BC, when the first structures were built, to about 2900 BC, when the main occupation ended. Less intensive occupation and reuse of structures occurred until 2500 BC, when Structure 10 was decommissioned with a huge feast.

To give you a sense of why the Ness is unique, other Neolithic sites in Scotland (and in Europe in general) consist of relatively small family dwellings, some grouped into small villages and others standing as isolated farmsteads, often with a single larger structure. Skara Brae (2900–2500 BC) may be typical of some of these smaller communities. Each room is about 20 feet across (about 400 square feet), with walls over 6 feet thick, a hearth in the center, alcoves along the walls for beds and storage, storage boxes in the floors,

and a simple drainage system running beneath the structures (yes, the start of indoor plumbing!).



**Photo of Skara Brae showing an early structure, about 2900 BC.** There were probably about 10 to 12 such structures in the village. The people in the background provide a sense of the smaller scale of the community.

The Ness has all that, but at a monumental scale, with all of the structures similar to or larger than the single large structures typical of other Neolithic communities. Structure 27 at the Ness, for example, was 55 x 36 feet (about 1,980 square feet), with walls possibly 6 feet thick. Some structures had tile roofs. Carved and painted stones, ceramics, and other artifacts and raw materials all suggest that Orkney was in contact with much of Neolithic Europe, including the people building Stonehenge in southern England at the same time.



**Ness of Brodgar Structure 5:** The excavated portion of this structure is 52 feet long (with another 15 feet unexcavated) and 25 feet across at its widest point, with walls 6 feet thick. Built about 3300 BC, it is one of the earlier structures at the site.

The excavators have ruled out the Ness being a simple habitation site and sometimes describe it as a monumental settlement complex. During our tour, the site director, Nick Card, characterized it as representing “three Cs: conspicuous competitive consumption”—a place where rival clans and their leaders congregated, each generation making its mark through new building designs and construction that remodeled or scavenged materials from older buildings, perhaps maintaining a link to the past while building anew. Most of the site was abandoned in some periods, and then reoccupied. At a final feast shortly after 2500 BC, the shin bones (tibiae) of an estimated 400 cattle were buried in a ditch that surrounded one of the last buildings in use at that time. As one of the guidebooks asks— Where are the rest of the carcasses? So many questions remain for the future!



**Etched stones.** Several stones with etchings have been found at the Ness. Some etchings are faint and look like casual scratching, while others are deep, deliberate designs. Some of the stones were placed to be seen, and others were within walls or otherwise hidden. The placement and motifs of the decorated stones remain one of the major topics of study. This etched stone shows a distinctive “butterfly” motif found on several stones at the Ness.



**Stone ball from the Ness of Brodgar.** One of the more beautiful yet enigmatic artifacts, this stone ball fits nicely in the hand at nearly 3 inches in diameter, but its function is unknown. There are other stone balls known from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age in Scotland, each unique in design.

What exactly happened at the site is unknown, but the excavators hope to develop a better understanding as they study the artifacts and plant and animal remains recovered from the site. Many dissertations and reports are being prepared on specialized studies of the animal bones, wood and other plant remains, pottery, lithics, sediments, rocks, artwork, and the structures themselves. A museum exhibit we visited in Kirkwall, Orkney, showcased many of the artifacts found across Scotland during this time, including carved stone balls, all different.

Why and how does all this resonate with a Midwest archaeologist? There are some striking similarities between human cultures across the world and throughout time, and travelling to see sites created by different cultures has been fascinating. One common theme is that waterways connect people:

they served as ancient highways when travel by water was quicker, easier, and probably safer than on land. Recent discovery of the many ancient canoes in Lake Mendota, Wisconsin, and the Ho-Chunk Nation’s creation of a dugout canoe and historically important journeys with it, including on the Mississippi River, remind us of the importance of waterways and how they connect people with the rest of their world.

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The Ness of Brodgar website with fabulous 3D and drone images of the site: [www.nessofbrodgar.co.uk](http://www.nessofbrodgar.co.uk)



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## SUPPORTING MVAC

If you haven't already, please consider renewing your support for MVAC's ongoing mission of discovery, research, education, and preservation. If you would prefer, you can make your donation with our **secure online donation** option through the UWL Foundation. Your support is greatly appreciated!

## MVAC EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE SUPPORTED IN PART BY:

- The United Fund for the Arts and Humanities
- The National Endowment for the Humanities