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## THE HUMAN REMAINS

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The human bones from Howe were very fragmented and showed signs of considerable disturbance. Many individual bones were excavated from rubble contexts and wall fills and although these were, wherever possible, fitted on to an individual skeleton, in most cases this could not be done. Using the left femur as an indicator, a minimum of eight bodies were identified from the site, mainly from the Iron Age phases. These were represented by five adults, one juvenile and two foetal or full-term skeletons.

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### METHODS AND MEASUREMENTS

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The small sample makes mortality statistics meaningless but it is perhaps significant that only just over half the individuals found had reached maturity. Calculations of foetal and infant ages, using tables based on modern measurements from Hungary, although a useful guide, must be taken with caution when applied to prehistoric skeletons from Britain.

An absence of complete long bones precluded the estimation of stature in most cases. The catalogue with measurements is available in archive. Details of the pathology and analysis of the bones are available in microfiche (3:G7-G14).

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### DISTRIBUTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE BONE

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#### PHASES 3-6

Phase 3 was the earliest phase to produce human bone. Here a vertebra, SF 6623, was found in clay forming part of the upper fills of the Neolithic ditch.

In Phase 5, a number of human bones, SF 5451, were found in the fill of a tank beneath the roundhouse entrance passage. The bones were used for radiocarbon dating (GU-1799) and produced a date which gives a calibrated range of 524-375 cal BC (10 Radiocarbon Dates below). The condition of the bones from this phase was poor; they were very thin with poor muscle markings; some features are suggestive of walking or running in rough country. Although they were found and excavated as one skeleton, they appeared to belong to two adults, possibly a young male in his teens and a female of 20+. Excavation evidence did not suggest a burial but it is likely that the bones were deposited at the end of Phase 5.

During Phase 5/6 five unrelated human bone samples, representing a minimum of two adults, were mainly recovered from the E side of the settlement. Over the top of the Neolithic ditch fills in the E came SF 6463 and 6472/7104, the latter being most of a mandible. Further fragments of a mandible, SF 5908, from an individual aged between 17 and 20 and other bones and fragments including SF 5557, were found in rubble layers in the NE. Fragments of a skull, SF 5737, possibly of a young adult, came from a rampart wall in the E. The distribution of these early samples and their deposition in rubble contexts suggests that the bones were old before Phase 5 and possibly before Phase 3.

Two other isolated samples were found in Phases 6 and 6-9 contexts: the former, SF 5926, in the Broch 1 wall core, and the latter, SF 3339, probably a young adult of 18-20, in clay over the Phase 5/6 rampart in the W.

#### EARLY PHASE 7

From the early part of Phase 7, nine individual samples of human bone were found scattered across the site. Several bones forming

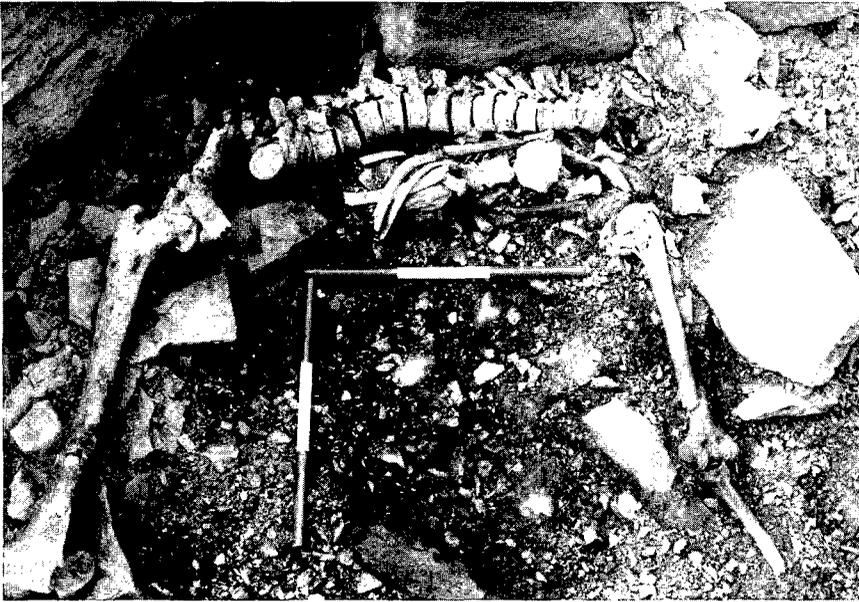
SF 3377, an adult, were found in an earth floor of the **SE** building. SF 3362 came from an ash spread and SF 3683 from rubble in the same building, but the bones were not related. The dividing wall between the **SE** and **E** buildings contained a human molar, SF 6615, and another, SF 5726, was found within the floor of the **NE** building. Isolated bones of an adult over 25, SF 3390, were found in one of the walls of the **SW** building and others, SF 6492, in the rubble backing to the dividing wall between the **SW** and **NW** buildings. Other bones, SF 5690, came from the broch wall core and fragments of a fibula, SF 3355, from rubble inside the broch tower.

As in earlier phases, isolated or groups of fragmentary bones occurred in walls and rubble contexts, the exceptions being the three samples which were located in domestic floors and debris within buildings. The predominant distribution of these samples lay towards the E and N of the site.

From contexts at the end of this phase, the remains of four skeletons were discovered. Prominent amongst these was the skeleton, SF 4546, a probable male of 35-45 with underdeveloped shoulders and poor teeth (illus 156). It was found in rubble within the rampart cell of the **NW** building yard. The skeleton lay against the curved wall of the cell towards the NW. Its surviving leg and its back lay parallel to the wall of the cell and its left arm lay outstretched away from the body. The head of the skeleton lay close to an upright stone and the body lay on its left side, which was the best preserved.

The position of the skeleton suggests that the body had been placed in the cell rather than buried. The fact that it lay within a layer of rubble and was soon covered by collapse from the broch tower, suggests that the body was dumped in an area no longer used and that the cell may have been roofless or unsafe.

Scattered in the N part of the yard of the **NW** building to the E of, and immediately above the male skeleton SF 4546, was the remains of a foetus, SF 4546/3773. The evidence suggests that the foetus was not formally buried but placed in the rubble in the same way as, and close to, the male skeleton. Disturbance of the



Illus 156  
Male skeleton (SF 4546) found in rubble, Phase 7.



Illus 157  
Infant skeleton (SF 4736/4738) found in rubble, Phase 7.

foetal bones may have been due to its shallow deposition within the rubble.

1m to the SW of skeleton SF 4546 were found the bones of an infant, SF 4736/4738, in the levelled rubble of the same yard (illus 157). Some of the bones were also located in the adjacent rampart wall, possibly due to animal disturbance. As with the two skeletons described above, no features of a formal burial were observed. These three skeletons, adult male, foetus and infant, were contemporary, being deposited in the same rubble context.

Close to these skeletons but found partly within an ash dump in the same yard was the skeleton of a young child, possibly female, about 10 or 11, SF 5677/5958/3951/6462/5445. The bones were, however, widely scattered throughout the deposits of the yard and a burial pit was not found in the ash. This skeleton is stratigraphically earlier than those described above, as it was deposited within ash formed during the use of the yard. The scattered nature of the skeleton can be partly explained by subsequent yard clearance and later disturbances.

#### LATER PHASE 7

During the latter part of Phase 7, eight samples of isolated human bone scatters were located. Fragments of a skull SF 3135, were found in the large dump of material placed outside and immediately W of the broch entrance. In the second reuse of the broch tower a sample, SF 3121, was found in the entrance. In sheds to the S of the tower, a bone, SF 3446, and a skull fragment, SF 3887, were found. Within the alterations to the **SE** building a clavicle, SF 3359, and fragments of another, SF 3454, were located. SF 3694 was found in the earth floor of the **E** building and in the levelled rubble of the **NE** yard, SF 3711 was recovered.

As with the scattered bones from earlier phases, many of these samples came from rubble contexts and wall fills. The evidence suggests that the material had been reworked and possibly been brought in from other areas of the site. Human bone found in domestic earth floors is more of a problem, and it might suggest that soil was brought in to prepare an earth floor and bones were brought in with it.

### LATER PHASES

In Phase 7/8 only one fragmentary human bone, SF 3031, was located in an abandonment surface. From Phase 8 in the abandonment rubble of the broch tower fragmentary bones, SF 1920, were found. In a wall of a Late Phase 8 Stage 4 building was a single phalange, SF 1257. In the rubble on top of the broch was another fragmentary sample of human bone, SF 51, found in Phase 8/9. In the unstratified rubble and ploughed topsoil three samples of single bones, SF 448, 650, 1749, were found scattered across the southern part of the site.

Close to the top of the mound were the remains of one fragmentary skeleton, SF 68/126/644, a male of between 25 and 30 years of age. The bones had been excavated from rubble lying one metre over the top of the Broch 2 intramural staircase and 0.5–0.8m below the turf line. Although not found in a formal grave, these bones may have been redeposited on top of the broch from a site lower down the settlement mound, or at the base of it where they were probably disturbed by ploughing. It has been suggested (8.11 Finds From the 19th Century above) that this skeleton may have been of Norse date through its implied association with the putative Norse glass linen smoother (illus 155) found in the 19th century.

### CONCLUSIONS – with BBS

This collection of human bone from Howe is important as it is the largest contemporary collection from an Iron Age site in the Northern Isles. However, no intact formal burials were located although five, possibly six, skeletons were disposed of from Phase 5 to the end of Early Phase 7. This covers the period from at least the 4th century cal BC to the 4th century cal AD.

Of the 38 samples of human bone collected from the site, the vast majority were isolated bones or groups of bones. They were found in rubble contexts, wall fills and occasionally in earth floors. As mentioned above, it would seem that these remains were subject to disturbance and reworking, perhaps over an exceedingly long period of time. The occurrence of isolated bones in rubble layers in Phases 3 to 6 indicates that the bones were older than the phases in which they were found. The same can be said for isolated bones in Phases 7 and 8. It would seem unlikely that a cemetery would be disturbed and used for building rubble. More plausible is the idea that these bones originally derived from either the Phase 1 or the Phase 2 Neolithic tombs on the site.

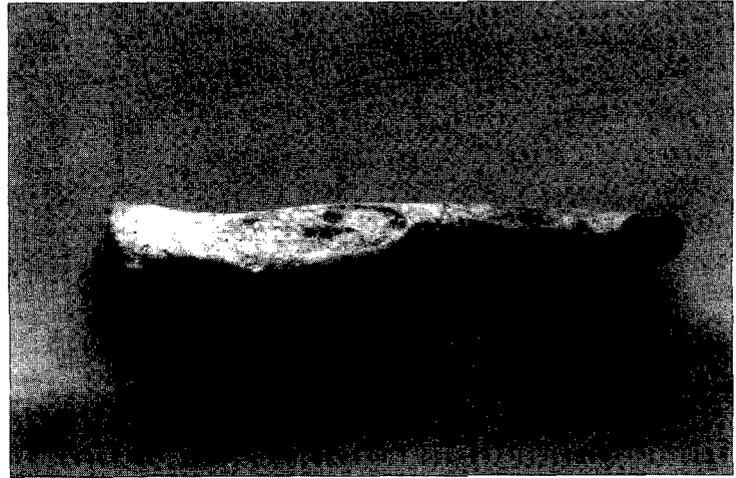
The Phase 2 Maeshowe-type tomb was robbed of stone prior to Phase 5 and was rebuilt as a roundhouse in that phase. If human skeletal remains in the tomb were disturbed then, they may have been reburied beyond the settlement to the E. The majority of the isolated bones were found in Iron Age structures in that direction. Although it has been argued (2.2 above) that the Maeshowe-type tomb could well have remained unused, it would seem a logical origin for these bones. Radiocarbon dates from some of the bones may solve the problem of their origin, but this was not thought worthy of the expense.

The Iron Age inhabitants at Howe are represented by the possible young male and associated young female, a female foetus, a 10 month old boy, a 9–10 year old girl and an older middle aged man. This selection of the settlement's population reflects the disposal of bodies in unusual circumstances. Where the majority of the inhabitants were buried is not known, but the assumption must be somewhere in the vicinity of the settlement.

The hurried disposal of 4 corpses in debris within the *NE* building at the end of Phase 7, may reflect the structural problems seen in the broch tower then, and the threat it must have produced on the daily life of the village. The corpses were only shallowly placed in rubble and were disturbed by dogs or other animals as the evidence of gnawing indicates. Traditional burial rites were no doubt disregarded and in fact the disposal of these corpses suggests little about the inhabitants religious beliefs, except it seems that a hurried and informal deposition of four bodies within a relatively short space of time, was acceptable.

The partial remains of what are now thought to be two young adults were found deposited in the roundhouse tank at the end of Phase 5. The condition of the bones was poor and there is little to indicate if they were deposited in a ritual form, or whether their inclusion in the tank silts was accidental. They were buried beneath a collapse from the Neolithic clay mound which formed parts of the side of the tank. There appears to have been little or no attempt to recover the bodies.

A collection of disturbed bones, representing one other skeleton (a male of between 25–30 years of age) were found during the early stages of excavation on the top of the settlement mound. This may have been a Viking burial from which a glass linen smoother (A119: Stromness Natural History Museum; 8.11 19th-Century Finds above) is derived. The link is tenuous, but the incident is not unknown. Up to six possible, and one definite, Viking graves have been identified at the Broch of Gurness, associated with grave goods and isolated Norse finds including a glass linen smoother (Hedges 1987b, 72, 73).



Illus 158  
Left clavicle of skeleton (SF 4546) showing marked flattening of antero-posterior at sternal end of shaft.

The small sample of the population represented by the total collection of bones from the site would appear to have been fairly healthy; no broken bones were noted, but infant mortality may have been high. The main diseases seem to have been related to the gums and teeth, where caries, heavily worn teeth, pulp exposure, and abscesses may have been the norm. Other evidence indicates that heavy manual work brought about skeletal changes especially in the clavicles (illus 158), femora and tibias. This type of skeletal evidence has been well documented in the Neolithic populations of Orkney (Chesterman 1979 & 1983), where pushing or carrying heavy loads, especially up hill is thought to be the cause.

It is not possible, given the small number and scattered nature of human remains from Howe, to indicate familial traits, average life expectancy, the physique of the population, the general occurrence of diseases and abnormalities or the traditional burial rites. In an intensively occupied settlement mound it was unusual to find contemporary skeletons; in the absence of evidence for the site's cemetery, these remains at least offer some insight into the physical nature of the Iron Age, if not earlier, community at Howe.

