

CONTENTS

1. STONES AT THE END OF THE WORLD 9

2. LAND OF ORCS 19

3. TWO THIRDS OF A RIDDLE 31

4. AN ORCADIAN SAGA 41

5. A DESIGNED LANDSCAPE 57

6. ISLES OF BRIDES 71

7. A TRADITION OF SACREDNESS 93

8. LAND OF THE BRIDE OF THE SUN 127

9. THE SECRET MEMORY OF WORDS 165

10. ARMENIAN CRADLE 185

11. TRAVELING LORDS 203

12. THE IRISH CONNECTION 221

13. THEY CAME FROM THE NORTH 239

Notes and Bibliography 255

Image credits 271

Index 271

About the Author 282



The stones of Stenness.

AN ORCADIAN SAGA



he Orkney archipelago has been called the Egypt of the North on account of the disproportionate number of Neolithic sacred sites – 3000 at last count – relative to its territory. The closest comparative example is the archipelago of Malta.

Orkney's coastline is gradually yet surely submerging. There is no doubt that beneath shallow waters lie the remains of earlier sites, and with them a larger civilization footprint. One circular structure has been identified under Loch Harray, beside the Ring of Brodgar – a potential precursor to the stone circle, as though the builders were seeking higher ground. Barely three miles to the east, a submerged 120-foot mound and a series of megalithic structures exist in what is now the Bay of Firth. Archaeologist Caroline Wikham-Jones believes that, given the amount of drowned coastline, the number of submerged sites may be substantial.¹

One passage mound by the name Point of Cott has lost half its bulk since 1935 as the Atlantic slowly but inexorably nibbles it away into the sea, and yet the same

storms that perpetually bash the islands are paradoxically revealing Neolithic habitations, left in an excellent state of preservation thanks to thousands of years of protective cover by sand dunes and grass.

One of the joys of exploring the archipelago is the rare privilege of experiencing a rich Neolithic heritage in peace and quiet, save for the automatic chomping of grass by sheep which, I have to admit, sounds relaxing *in situ*. When the rain inevitably comes, there is always the option of retiring for a *dram*, watching the weather turn, and returning once more to your chores.

Incidentally, the much-celebrated *dram* is not a Scottish word at all but an Armenian import, and in both places it means the same thing.

Back in the fields, I wandered off from Stenness – now barely seven feet above sea level – to make friends with a lone standing stone on the next ridge before continuing to the imposing and elegant chambered mound of Maeshowe and its encircling ditch. From above it looks like an exercise ball was dropped by a butter-fingered god and left a single ripple that in its time was filled with water. According to the *Orkneyinga* saga, in 1153 a group of Viking warriors once sought shelter from a blizzard inside the spacious chamber: “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 Hamnavoe on Hrossey [Mainland Orkney], and on the thirteenth day of Christmas they travelled on foot over to Firth. During a snowstorm they took shelter in Orkahaugr [Maeshowe] and there two of them went insane, which slowed them down badly, so that by the time they reached Firth it was night-time.” Before leaving, one obliging Viking carved the following runic inscription on the chamber wall: JÓRSALAFARAR BRUTU ORKHAUG (JERUSALEM-TRAVELLERS [CRUSADERS] BROKE ORK MOUND).² Early Christians have

claimed Maeshowe was burgled and looted by bloodthirsty Norwegians, but now, thanks to graffiti, we have the other side of the story. Accounts of Vikings as nothing more than marauding barbarians began circulating around the time Christianity migrated to the isles of Scotland, yet new research suggests that much of the contact was based on friendly trade and settlement. The history of human conquest is awash with incomers portraying others as evildoers, and in this case the misconception centers around Scandinavian settlers being lumped into the same stew as *vikingr*, ‘pirates’, and left to suffer the consequences of this malicious exercise in public relations.

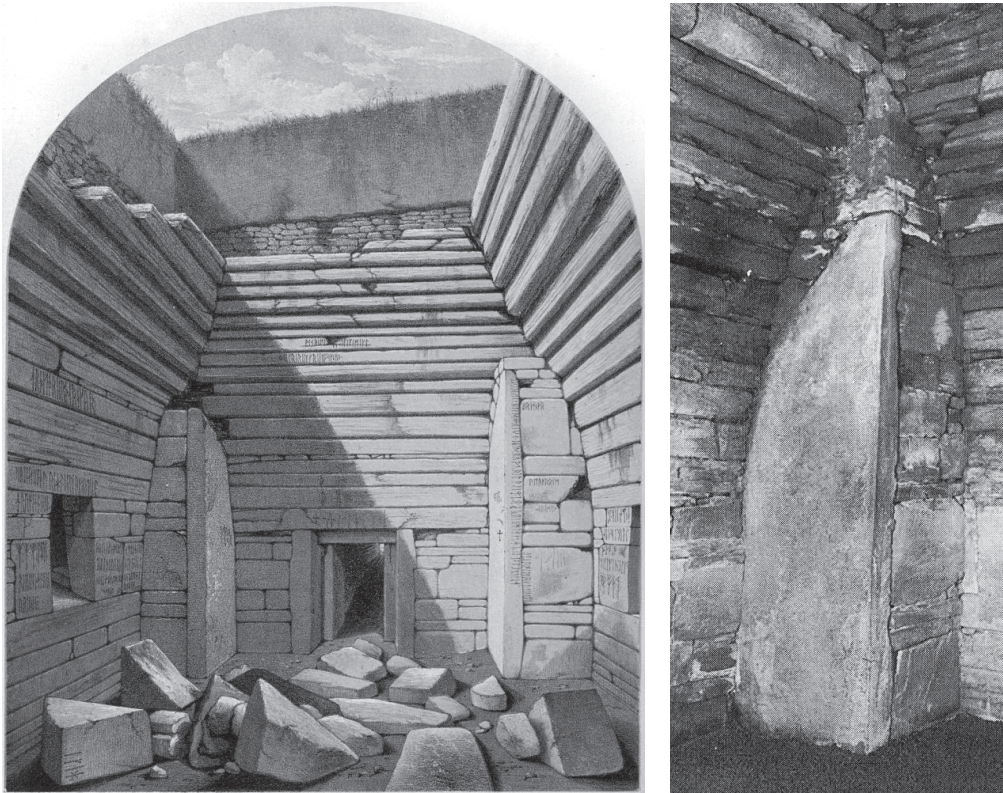
By the time Christian looters broke into Maeshowe the entrance was no longer visible, forcing them to seek entry by digging a hole through the roof. Consequently the mound we see today is 13 feet shorter than its original height. Prior to its official excavation in 1861 – ironically using the same hole to gain entry – Maeshowe’s exterior also looked very different to the soft, spherical shape we see today. In a letter to *The Orcadian* newspaper, George Petrie describes the mound as 36-foot high with a “bluntly conical outline” and a deep depression in the top.³



Maeshowe, with lochs Harray and Stenness, 1862.

Watercolors painted around this time show Maeshowe to be just so, its profile bearing a resemblance to the Phrygian cap worn by worshippers of the ancient cult of Mithras, centered in and around Asia Minor. Indeed, there may be more than a passing observation here because, architecturally, the inside of Maeshowe shares more in common with passage mounds of Mycenia and the *kurgans* of the Black Sea region than it does with Scotland.⁴ *Kurgan* derives from the Armenian word *kura-garq*, ‘crucible of the social class’, which in the context of a circular building denotes a meeting place for high ranking people – a select priesthood, if you like – and tallies well with etymology found in later Sumerian language. A second possibility, *kura-grag*, ‘crucible of fire energy’, implies an astronomical connection and ties in nicely with Maeshowe’s alignment, as we shall see.

For decades it was generally accepted that Maeshowe and its circular bank were contemporary works, but radiocarbon dating proves otherwise. For one thing, the mound was erected upon an existing artificial platform. While the bank and platform suggest a date of 3990 BC, the mound itself dates to 2820 BC, a discrepancy of over one thousand years.⁵ Since the latter results are based entirely on bone fragments found inside the mound rather than the organic material of the mound itself we are left no wiser as to its true age, only that it was likely decommissioned at that time, sealed, and human remains deposited within. The date is also consistent with the decommissioning of nearby Ness of Brodgar and its deliberate burial, providing a snapshot of a culture that appears to have completed a phase of its allotted work and moved elsewhere. This was common practice throughout ancient temple culture whenever the cycle and purpose of a building had run its course. Case in point: Cairnpapple, originally a henge on the Scottish mainland, was re-



1862 excavation. The corner uprights resemble those of Stenness, and serve no structural purpose.

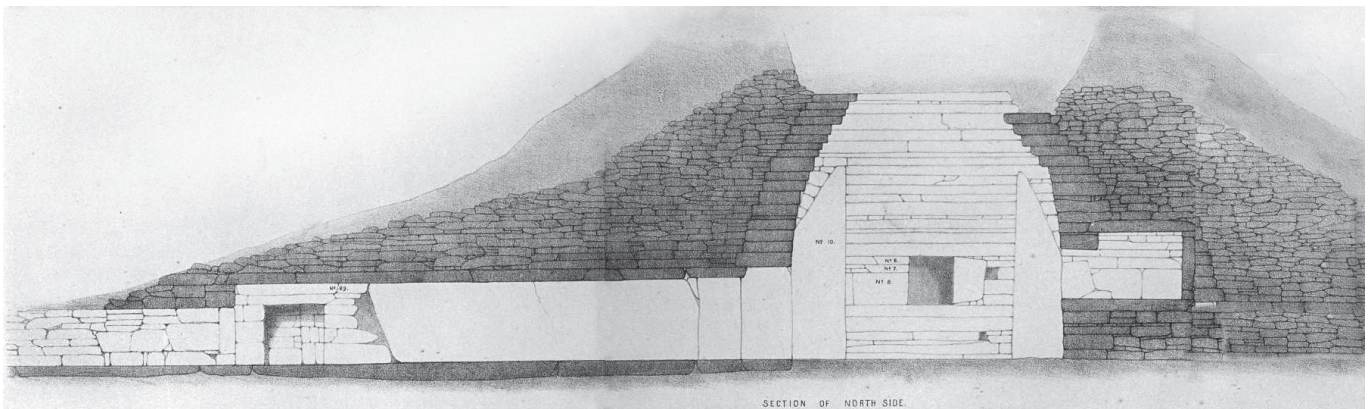
purposed as a burial site a thousand years after its initial construction.

But let's return to the artificial platform upon which Maeshowe stands. At the edge of it, two large sockets once contained a pair of standing stones even larger than those at nearby Stenness, which appear to have been aligned to the rising midwinter Sun. Did the mound builders engage in a kind of stone cannibalism? Since no further excavation has been carried out it is impossible to prove that the two stones formed part of a previous circle whose stones were recycled to build Maeshowe's interior passage.⁶ However, to cite one of many examples of this practice, in Carnac, whose structures are believed to have been precursors to Scotland's, the notable passage mounds of Gavrinis, Table des Marchand and Kercado utilize menhirs extracted from the megalithic site of Er Grah.⁷

Proper access into Maeshowe is made via a low and narrow thirty-foot-long passageway. The front section consists of vertical layers of small irregular stones fitted like a field wall, whereas the rear, by contrast, is formed of industrially-fitted megalithic slabs, indicating that the front was extended at a later period by a stone mason with different abilities. The rear section is strangely reminiscent of the passage leading into the Queen's Chamber of the Great Pyramid of Giza, right down to the width and height.

As a whole, the passage is divided by a door jamb, beyond which is a triangular alcove with a large triangular stone, slightly narrower than the width of the passage, allowing it to fit perfectly into the recess, provoking the archaeologist George Petrie to write the following observation: "This block suggests the idea that it had been used to shut up the passage... and that it was pushed back into the recess in the wall when admission into the chamber was desired."⁸

Anyone who has seen the blocking stone will agree that moving it in and out is not a simple task; it would be much easier to maneuver if sealing the passage from the inside, implying the chamber was used for some unspecified ritual, or perhaps the conduct of exclusive affairs. During his excavation James Farrer makes no



Maeshowe passage and inner chamber, with hole in the ceiling where the less scrupulous forced an entry.

mention of human remains except for a small fragment of human skull, while Petrie himself refers to several skull fragments. Suffice it to say there was not a huge quantity of bone to justify Maeshowe being classified as a burial site. By comparison, the Quanterness chambered cairn of 3400 BC, a few miles to the east, was found packed with human remains.⁹

Having done my best to imitate a crouching chimpanzee, I joined the site's caretaker in the central chamber – a water-tight, high-roofed corbelled room with three small side-chambers set into the masonry three feet above the floor. The excavators of 1861 found this beautiful room to be “completely filled with the stones which had originally formed the upper part of the walls and roof, and with the clay which had completed the top of the tumulus.”¹⁰

Like me, Farrer's excavators found the quality of the dry-stone masonry impeccable, the walls rising 4.6 feet before a magnificent corbelled roof slopes inwards to form a kind of beehive. The height of the original roof is estimated at 19.6 feet – a measurement that is oddly consistent in monuments throughout the Scottish Isles. Four monoliths stand like stoic sentinels at each corner, fifteen feet tall, angled and pointed like the stones of Stenness. They serve no structural purpose, and since the chamber was built up around them, the stones were a planned feature from the outset. They were erected first and stood in the open landscape as Maeshowe rose.¹⁰ Perhaps there was an earlier structure here after all, a stone circle much like Stenness, as suggested; or perhaps the architect was inspired by the style of its angled megaliths. Or inspired by a visit to the Mediterranean even, because he or she reproduced, in miniature and in temperament, a chamber from the Red Pyramid at Dahshur, or for that matter, similar chambers found throughout Sardinia.

Alignment plays a key role in deciphering when a temple might have been built as well as in understanding its purpose. In the case of Maeshowe the main passage faces southwest and, as every tour guide points out, towards the setting midwinter Sun. Except the two don't quite line up nowadays. Due to the effects of a natural phenomenon called *precession*, with each passing millennia the Sun and stars rise and set in different places along the horizon, so much so that a modern-day visitor inside Maeshowe will not witness the beam of the Sun reaching the rear niche on the winter solstice unless they stay on for three more weeks.

Six thousand years ago it was a very different story. Maeshowe's passageway and its 5° angle of view is designed to frame the cleft made by the imposing slopes of Ward Hill and Knap of Trowieglen on the distant island of Hoy. Together with the foreground of southern Orkney, they combine to form a natural and unmistakable bowl. Taking the earliest radiocarbon date of 3990 BC at face value, the midwinter Sun would have set into this bowl and shone true down the passage of Maeshowe, assuming the mound was already built by this date and the alignment was marked by the original standing stones.



Trajectories of Sun, Moon and Orion's Belt into the bowl, 3990 BC.

A second object follows the Sun's trajectory into the bowl: the setting Moon at its Minor Standstill, consecrating the cosmic marriage of the solar masculine and lunar feminine. But there's more. On the night of the winter solstice, Orion's Belt is seen descending into the bowl, a performance repeated once again on the spring equinox.

The surprise here is that ancient people rarely, if ever commemorated or celebrated the setting of objects in the sky, but rather the rising or mid-heaven positions, when the energy and power of such 'gods' were deemed to be at their most abundant. Much in the same way no one celebrates an empty glass of Scotch. This glitch at Maeshowe has been bugging me for years, leading me to speculate that the mound's reference of the setting Sun and other celestial objects must have been important to people for whom this was culturally significant, and as far as I'm aware, the Egyptians and Armenians are the two rare cultures known to honor the setting Sun.

Could this have been the true purpose behind Maeshowe? In the ritual calendar, the south-western orientation of a temple celebrates harvest — the giving of thanks to the spirit of the land for providing an abundant supply of food, which, on an island known for its short



The interior passage.

growing season, would be cause enough for celebration. Or perhaps there's another, yet undiscovered, reason.

It was late in the day. My allotted time with the caretaker had run its course, and as she prepared to close the chamber I took the opportunity to kneel and look out along the shaft of the passageway. The pallid light of rainfall had surrendered to gleaming sunlight. The midwinter Sun might no longer align, but, unlike the stars, the immovable hulk of Hoy will always stare back. An angled stone at Stenness points to its natural chalice. It is referenced by a ledge cut into the nearby Station Stone. Even the tallest megaliths on Brodgar's southwest quadrant frame it.

It was time to take the ferry.



Braving the short ride across the shallow and truculent waters to Hoy is a kind of life accomplishment, an initiation, something to brag about to Odin on your way to Valhalla. Before a dramatic rise in sea level around 3000 BC, this channel would have been a series of shallow inlets, most of them easily forded. Nowadays the open ferry accommodates only a handful of vehicles. As I stood on deck, bracing against the gale while attempting to film the dramatic scenery, I wondered why people remained inside their vehicles instead of standing outside admiring what is, undoubtedly, a formidable example of prehistoric scenery, complete with Ridley Scott-style shafts of light among squalls of dark grey and orange cloud. When my feet became submerged in seawater I understood why the boat is designed with large holes around an open deck: to offer passage to waves so they wash through the boat.

Always learn from the locals.

Once on dry land and the only road along the length of Hoy, the valley separating the Knap of Trowieglan and Ward Hill is brooding territory, covered in bracken and bog. And legends. It is said that near the summit of Ward Hill something very bright is seen shining and sparkling from May to July, observed even from Orkney, but although many have climbed the hill in search of it no explanation has been forthcoming.

Perseverance and a stout pair of Wellingtons delivers you through the bog and halfway up the hill to two titanic, isolated blocks of Devonian red sandstone. The one further along appears to have had part of its face shaped by hand into a semi-circular bowl, although it is hard to tell because much of it is still covered with mud and heather.

The other is called the Dwarfie Stane. With laser-like precision some unidentified stonemason sliced a hole about three-feet square, then continued for eight feet into the solid slab. To the left, a semi-circular chamber some five feet long features a raised lip on the floor as though meant to hold a thin layer of liquid. To the right is a



Dwarfie Stane.

similar chamber bordered by what can only be described as a rectangular picture frame meant to prevent someone or something from falling out. Carved along the base of the rear wall is what appears to be a stone bolster.

The feeling inside this hollow world is not so much of claustrophobia as of omnipresence. You can hear your breath as much as your heart – you become instantly aware of your mortality. I have been inside many chambers in the world and crawled along narrow passages under pyramids, but I can say this experience, above all others, is disarming. What on earth were people doing in here?

Part of the answer rests outside the entrance, where lies a large sandstone plug used to seal the entrance, leaving but a sliver of a gap to allow oxygen to pass inside. If someone were meant to have been buried inside here, they hardly would have needed air to breathe. Quite how this plug was cut from the main slab and then from the back is a mystery – or perhaps the plug was fashioned from identical stone with identical veins and made to fit precisely. Either way a lot of effort was employed to create a womb from a slab of sandstone in a remote and



Dwarfie Stane, central chamber.

otherwise featureless valley. When unnamed visitors came here prior to the 16th century – maybe the same “crusaders” fingered by the Vikings – they found the Dwarfie Stane still plugged. Unable to dislodge it, they broke in by smashing a hole in the roof, for which they were compensated with a treasure of ... nothing. So much, then, for the tomb theory.

Local legends accredit the work to a dwarf, while another contradictorily attributes it to a giant. But perhaps the most revealing information about the Dwarfie Stane comes from a 19th century graffito carved in both English and Persian on the south exterior face by one William Mounsey. Captain Mounsey had been posted to the Middle East where he took a passionate interest in Persian and Egyptian cultures. By the time he returned to England he'd become a mystic, and his veneration of sacred places defined his later life as an antiquarian. Which leads us to his carving: “I HAVE SAT TWO NIGHTS AND SO LEARNT PATIENCE.”

Did Mounsey miss a bus? Was he stranded on Hoy for two nights and resorted to using the chamber for shelter?



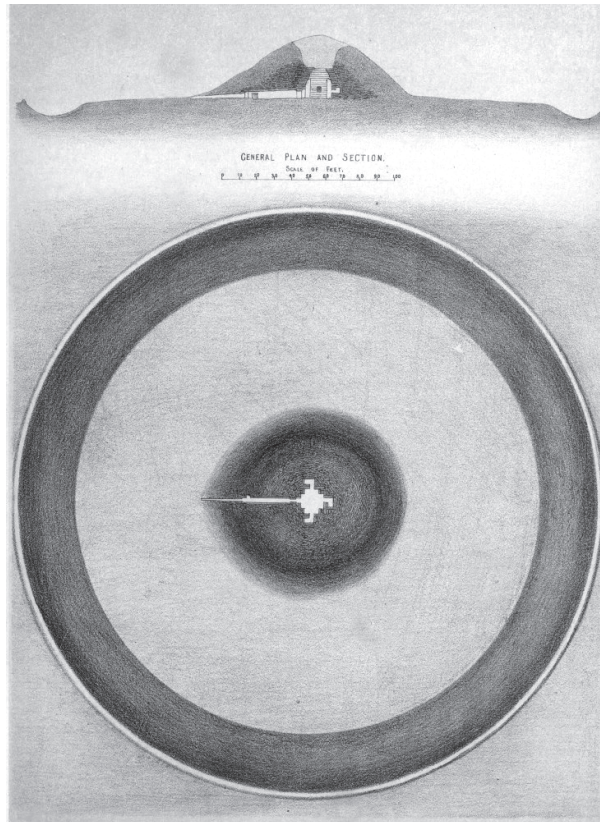
Dwarfie Stane, right chamber.

To someone who's researched and practiced the mystical arts for a considerable period, it is very clear what Mounsey was conveying to visitors: the chamber is used for shamanic travel, the ultimate test of patience. The clue here is the entrance's precise alignment due West, the ritual direction to the spirit world – Annwn to the Gaelic people. With several hours at my disposal before catching the return ferry, I decided to go meet this Celtic Otherworld.

Lying flat in each of the cavities, I noted how they were designed to generate a perfect resonance, and a very, very low one at that. There are two other places I know where such a low note, performed appropriately, reaches the same desired effect: one is West Kennett Long Barrow in England, a passage mound where people practiced exactly the same ritual and, coincidentally where the bones of very, very tall people were interred. The other is the box in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid.

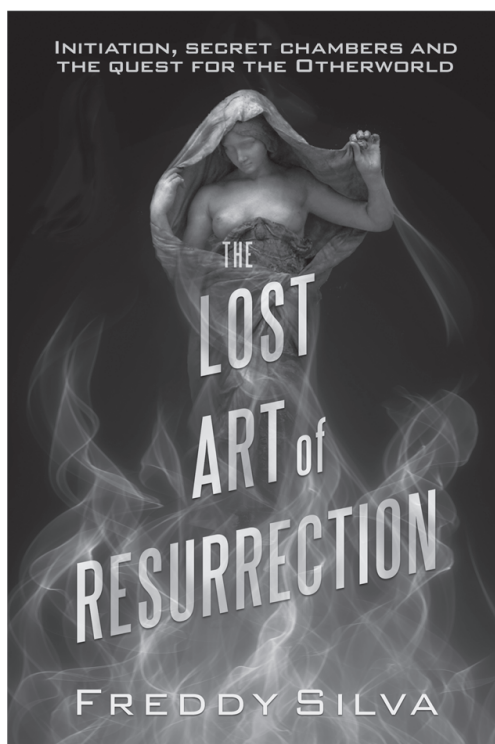
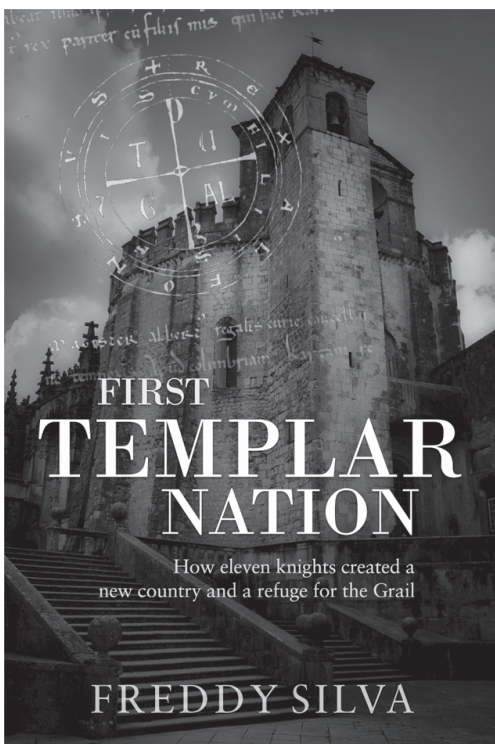
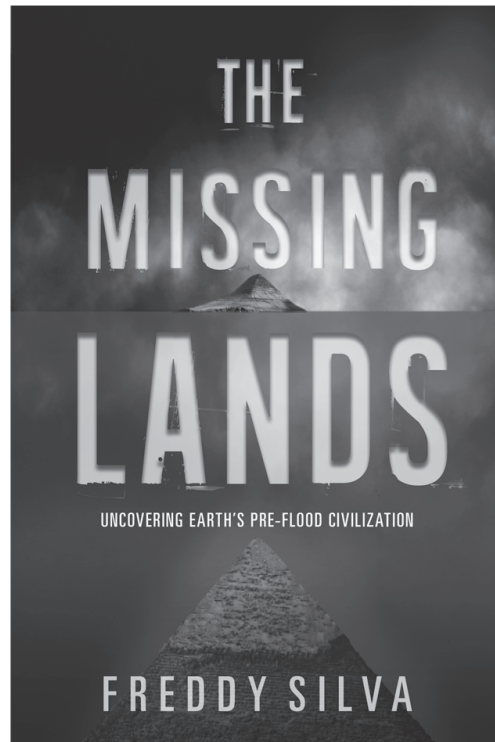
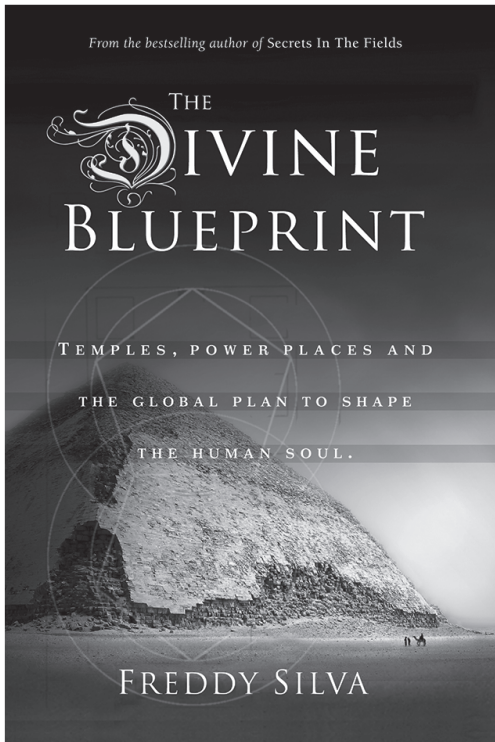
Sustaining the low note for only a couple of minutes, I was already halfway out-of-body. It rapidly became difficult to maintain a grasp on consciousness. Given that a ferry was waiting, I practiced and recorded the sound for ten minutes before concluding that if I stayed, I, like Mounsey, would discover patience inside the Dwarfie Stane whilst traveling into the Otherworld for two nights.

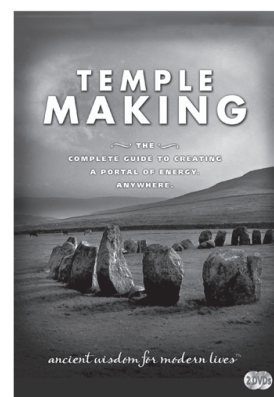
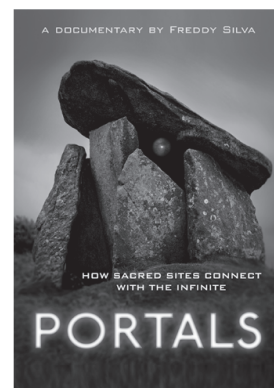
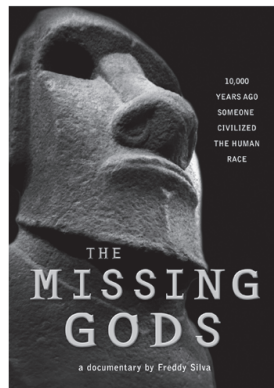
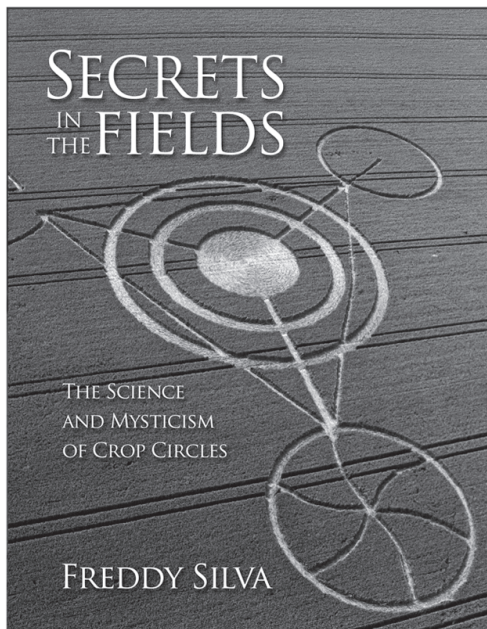
So this is the object to which all those sites on Orkney are pointing. If this assumption is correct then what we are dealing with here on the northern limits of the world is the beginning of an intentionally designed ritual landscape.



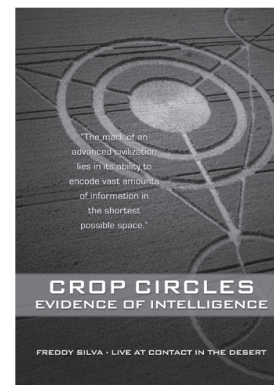
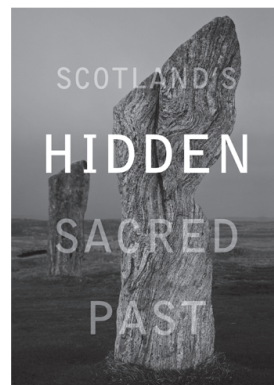
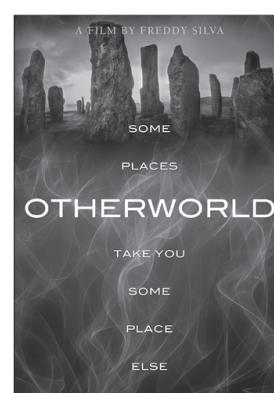
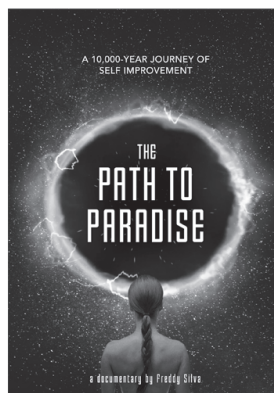
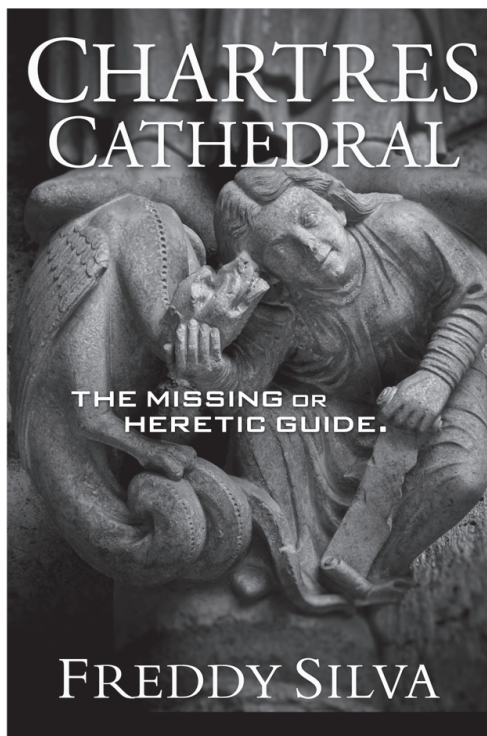
Maeshowe.

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Freddy Silva is a bestselling author, and one of the world's leading researchers of ancient civilizations and systems of knowledge, and the interaction between temples and consciousness. He has published seven books and over a dozen documentaries.

He is also a fine art photographer.

Described as “perhaps the best metaphysical speaker,” he has lectured worldwide for two decades, with notable keynote presentations at the International Science and Consciousness Conference, and the International Society For The Study Of Subtle Energies & Energy Medicine, in addition to regular appearances on GAIA TV, podcasts and radio shows. He leads sell-out tours to sacred sites in England, Scotland, France, Portugal, Malta, Yucatan, Guatemala, Peru and Egypt.

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