

Maeshowe

On land | Scotland | about 2800 BCE | Grades 3-5

Name _____ Date _____

Once a year, the setting winter sun shines straight down Maeshowe's passage and lights up the back wall.

Read the story

About 5,000 years ago, Neolithic farmers on Orkney built Maeshowe, one of the finest stone tombs in Europe. They stacked flat stone slabs into a square chamber with a tall corbelled roof, then covered it with a mound of earth.

The passage faces southwest. Around the shortest day of the year, the setting sun shines down the passage and lights up the back of the chamber. The builders must have watched the sky carefully to plan this.

About 4,000 years later, Vikings broke into the tomb around 1150 CE. They carved more than 30 runic messages on the walls, some bragging about treasure and some just jokes, plus pictures of a dragon and a walrus.

How it ended

The people who built Maeshowe slowly changed their ways of life over the Bronze Age, and the tomb was no longer used. Vikings broke in centuries later, and any treasure is long gone.

Key words

- runes: letters of the old Norse and Germanic alphabets
- chambered tomb: a stone burial room inside a mound
- corbelled roof: a roof built by stacking stones that slowly lean inward

Wow facts

- Vikings carved more than 30 runic messages inside, one of the largest collections anywhere.
- One Viking carving shows a dragon or lion with a curly tail.
- Each winter, the sunset lights up the back wall for a few weeks around the solstice.

Talk about it

1. Why might ancient people care so much about the shortest day of the year?

2. What would you carve on a wall for people 1,000 years from now to read?

Try this

Draw a map of Maeshowe as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. What lights up Maeshowe in winter?

- A. The setting sun
- B. A fire
- C. Lightning
- D. Moonlight only

2. Who carved runes in Maeshowe?

- A. Vikings
- B. Romans
- C. Egyptians
- D. Aztecs

3. Where is Maeshowe?

- A. Orkney, Scotland
- B. Egypt
- C. Peru
- D. Japan

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/maeshowe/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. A. Around the winter solstice, sunset shines down the passage.
2. A. Vikings broke in around 1150 CE and carved messages.
3. A. It is on the Orkney Islands off northern Scotland.