

British Prehistoric Rock Art

by Stan Beckensall

I visited Sweden for the first time in 2002 and was instructed in the methods of making rubbings on a surface at Simlis that resembles glass rather than the rough sandstone that I am used to, I was struck at once by the great difference that exists between British and Swedish rock art, not by the rock surface or by the technique of marking it, but by the symbolism. The main similar element in the motifs chosen is the cup, which in Britain is the most common. The great difference is that Britain lacks almost completely the pictorial motif. No matter how difficult it may be to understand the meaning of the Swedish pictures, boats, people and animals are clearly represented. Rarely do such things occur in Britain, and that makes interpretation very difficult.

I have been recording British rock art for over thirty years as a leisure-time activity. When I began it was regarded by some as the equivalent of brass-rubbing. No one tried seriously to research it or to fit it into the archaeological record. In many ways it was easier to classify flints, pottery or hillforts, there was little kudos to be gained from such a vague and unsatisfactory aspect of human culture as these marks on the rocks. All that has changed, we now have some of our bright archaeologists and government departments involved. Universities have set up rock-art departments. Much of the impetus has come from Europe and the rest of the world, but the early work that forms the basis of our present knowledge was carried out by intelligent and cultured people who had lives outside professional archaeology, with enquiring minds and other disciplines: the antiquarians of the last and the nineteenth century. Now money is being directed into the recording of rock art, into studies of the threats to it, and into its preservation and display. This comes as no surprise to continental archaeologists, who are already convinced of its importance. One example is in my main study-area and home: Northumberland.

At a place called Chatton Park Hill (NU07572906) there is some of the finest rock art in the world that has been so badly neglected that cattle freely trampled over it and there is no indication on site as to what is there or its importance. Now the farmer has successfully placed it into 'Stewardship', which means that he will receive money for protecting it and making it accessible to the public. It is now up to him and the rest of us to work out the route and the best way to view and conserve it. A second encouraging sign is that universities are at last incorporating rock-art into their curriculum, and departments of rock-art make it possible to include it as a component in a first degree or as a special study for a second degree or Ph.D.

Characteristics

What, then, are the main characteristics of British prehistoric rock-art?

It was made by hammering designs into rocks with a hard stone tool, probably with the aid of a mallet. Pick marks are widely visible. The basic symbols are known as 'cups and rings', with considerable variation that makes it unusual to find two designs exactly the same. We can discount any other motifs, which are in an insignificant minority. Symbolic art occurs in four contexts: the landscape, in burials, monuments and as portable examples.



Figure 1 Chatton Park Hill

Art in the landscape

In the landscape the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age people chose the best viewpoints and some special contexts such as stream sources. The markings seem to be associated with trails which nomadic pastoralists and hunters followed above valleys, not on the best agricultural soils. Had there been tree cover, some would have been in forest clearings, but many were on outcrop with little vegetation around them. Some could have recorded a special event, such as a feat of hunting or a death. We don't know.

There are many other things we don't know, despite all the new data that has flooded in. We cannot reach into the minds of people over thousands of years ago to understand how the symbols originated, how they were used or what they meant. It is likely that over a thousand years of use meant that the people who used them had forgotten their origin; all they knew was that they meant something and that the marks had to be made. It is particularly difficult to understand what they meant in the landscape, but we can say that the shape and surface of rocks was important to the designs, that the addition of motifs enhanced the rocks and their position in the landscape. We cannot date them from this, only speculate about the apparent nomadic element incorporated.

A recent discovery was made by my friends who, during a week's holiday in Cumbria, decided to look carefully at places where our other discoveries indicated a logic behind the placing of motifs in the landscape. In the valley leading from Lake Windermere to the Pike o' Stickle, one of the most important quarries for the production of high-quality polished axes that were exported all over Britain, they found that a massive block of andesite tuff was covered with motifs that had not been reported (Chapel Stile. NY31400582). This was a good example of putting theory into practice – which is how I find my new sites.

Burials

It is when we see the use of marked rocks in burials that we come closer to a time when they were used. Antiquarians noted the presence of marked rocks in graves, particularly inside cists that housed burials of the early Bronze Age. However, some of these stones may have been decorated earlier and been brought in from elsewhere. The great chambered tombs of the Boyne valley in Ireland are rich in motifs, both inside the

chambers and passages and on the kerb stones, and earlier than the profuse clusters of later round barrows that are spread across Britain.

That gives us an idea of the time span for the use of decorated stones in burials, as we shall see. Burials in mounds are one location for decorated rocks; in Northumberland there are decorated rock shelters/ rock overhangs that have burials, all late Neolithic/early Bronze Age in date, for cremated remains were placed in distinctive Food Vessels.

Although there are several burials associated with rock art, their number is very small compared with the hundreds of round barrows recorded, so we are not dealing with a general phenomenon. I excavated two mounds in Northumberland at Weetwood Moor (NU02152810) and Fowberry (NU01972784), sites lying close together. Both had been disturbed, the former three-quarters bulldozed. Neither had a cist nor any signs of burial. They lie in one of the most concentrated areas of rock-art in Britain; both incorporated decorated cobblestones that may have been carried to the site like wreaths to a funeral.

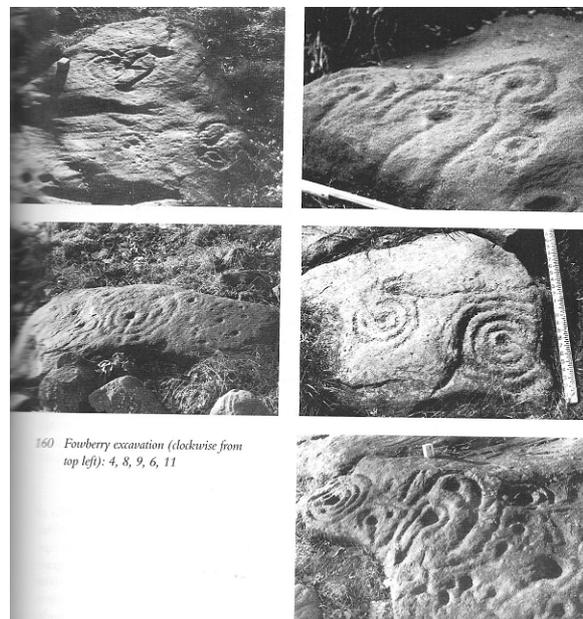


Figure 2 Fowberry

These cobbles (unquarried, partly rounded stones) would have been lying on the surface when the mounds were made, picked up, and the motifs were then pecked into them. All were fresh and showed no signs of erosion.

The Fowberry mound was a double concentric circle of kerbs packed with smaller stones to form a low wall, retaining the rest of the mound of cobbles; it was built prominently on a 20m stretch of outcrop sandstone that was covered with a variety of symbols that took the natural surface of the rock into account.

The Weetwood Moor cairn lay at the bottom of a plateau of outcrop that was covered with art; its largest stone, over 1m tall, originally faced inward so that its elaborate concentric rings around a cup and its three radial grooves would not have been seen; in the same cairn the decorated stones that survived the modern disturbance were face downward into the earth. The occurrence of such stones in ritual cairns gives rock-art a different use, for the decoration was taken out of the open air where it looked to the sky and was buried so

that no one could see it. As I assume that the mounds were not opened again for further use, it appears that offerings from the living to the dead were a private matter.

Other cairns in Britain have similarly-incorporated decorated cobbles, some recorded and unexcavated; some have motifs within the burial cists. These tend to be in the cup and ring tradition, but in Kilmartin, Scotland, there are cists with metal-type axes as well. Here on one large cist slab (now displayed inside one of many large round cairns made of rounded cobbles) cup marks have been overlaid by pictures of metal axes

The most important site excavated so far (but not published in full) was at Fulforth Farm, Witton Gilbert, near Durham, where a cist cover was decorated on the underside with cups and rings and the top with simple cups, some connected. Inside the cist were two pristine panels of rock art, every pick-mark visible, and the extended cist included cremations and carbon dated to c 2000BC. This means that an extensive use of rock art covers over a thousand years. That is ignoring other discoveries on later sites where the rock art may have been brought in because of its tradition of ritual significance or simply used as building material.

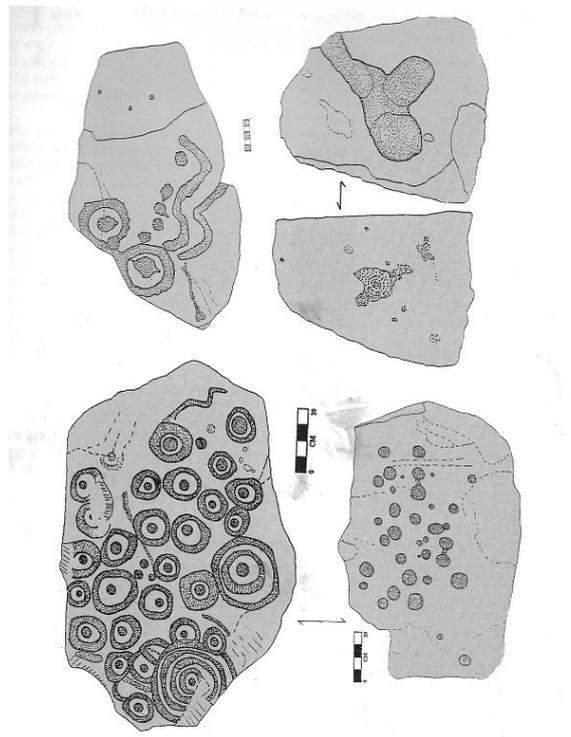


figure 3 Fulforth Farm

I excavated a rock shelter in Northumberland where a natural dome of rock that formed an overhang had a large circled basin and groove; on the floor of the rockshelter, which had been used centuries before by Mesolithic hunters, was a groove running down the floor to a triangular-shaped slab under which was a Food Vessel with a cremation (Corby's Crag, NU12790962).

At Goatscrag Hill (NT976371) in the same county a rockshelter with cups joined by curved grooves on top had Food Vessel Urns with many cremations. The rock art in this area leads along the top of an outcrop crag with decorated surfaces to the largest panel of decorated rock in northern England, at Roughting Linn.

Although it is not possible to state categorically that rock art and burials in these cases were made at the same time, it does mean that the places chosen for both were significant points in the landscape. This occurs, too, with burial mounds that are built on other decorated outcrop rocks. More excavation might add to our knowledge.



Figure 4 Ketley Crag

There is a particularly fine decorated rock shelter floor that I recorded recently at Ketley Crag (NU07432978), but there were no traces of anything else, although rock art there does not occur in isolation, following the pattern of many sites where it occurs in clusters. The general site, called Chatton Park Hill has superb outcrop decoration and a decorated rock on outcrop inside a prehistoric defensive enclosure, presumably earlier than the fort.

More and more discoveries are being made in northern England of cup marks, some with grooves, on or in cairns in cairnfields. A novel form of cairn recently recognised is built of three walls that meet at a common point (like a Mercedes car logo). One excavated example at Turf Knowe had Food Vessel burials (c 2000BC) with cremations, one of which had been displaced to make way for a much later cremation with an iron spearhead. More recently, a professionally-led amateur group excavated one on the edge of a cairnfield at Ray Sunnyside; it had no burial, but a cup-marked boulder was built into the end of one of the walls. Its date is c 2600BC. Some of the cairns on which rock art occurs are likely to be much older than those at Durham, Weetwood and Fowberry. Two examples will suffice.

At Old Parks (NY56993988) in Cumbria in 1892 a large mound was demolished for road building. From the pictures that we have and accounts it was a long oval mound with a 4.4m spine of five standing slabs, three of them decorated with the beginnings of spirals (like walking-sticks) and rough enclosures, with all the pick marks showing that they had been uneroded. The mound was used for later burials: at least 32 cremations and pottery of the early Bronze Age.

At Lilburn in Northumberland a pit contained two layers of cremations in ten scoops, with two broken decorated slabs with them. One has a rare horned spiral and other designs. It may be that the pit was covered with a long mound. It is possible that the Old Parks and

Lilburn barrows were older than the round cairns that are encountered in very large numbers.

Art in monuments

There are many decorated standing stones in Britain, either single, parts of alignments or parts of stone circles. Rock art emphasises the importance of a particular part of a monument.

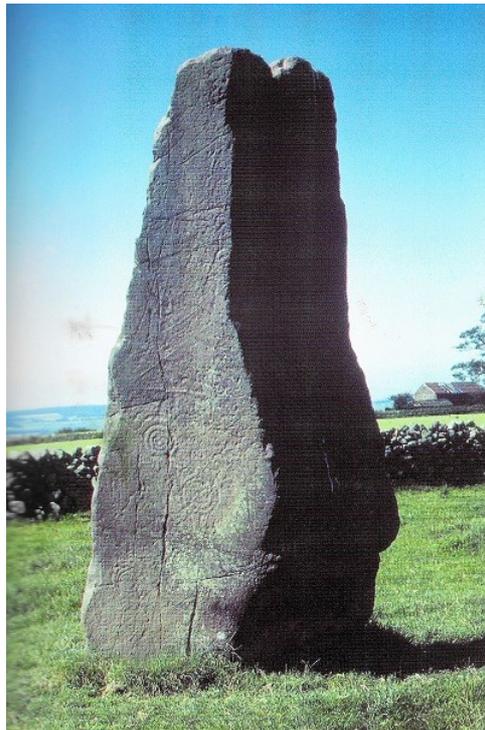


Figure 5 Long Meg

For example, the huge standing stone known as Long Meg (NY571372), covered with symbols, is the largest and only sandstone among glacial erratics. It lies outside the portal stones that lead into the circle, and may have existed there before the erection of the circle. The circle itself, though very large, is seen from aerial photography to be only one monument of many, for there are many ditches, one much larger than the stone circle, as part of a big ritual complex.

At Kilmartin, Argyll, Scotland, there are many cup marked standing stones that form a complex of alignments among lines of burial cairns. The Temple Wood stone circle (NR8269788), with the advantage of being thoroughly excavated in recent times, revealing a thousand years' use, has linked spirals on one standing stone, two concentric circles on another, and one of the horizontal stones that closes the gap between standing stones has cup marks. An importantly-positioned stone at Castlerigg, Cumbria (NY292236), has recently revealed a spiral, and there are lozenge-shaped motifs on two others.

These examples, from many more, show that motifs from simple cup marks to more elaborate concentric circles and spirals played some part in monuments.

Portable art

Portable rock art is on stones that have been moved from their original position by people; I prefer this term to 'mobiliary'. As there are hundreds of examples in Britain, with more being found each year, I shall confine myself to saying that they turn up in spoil heaps, field clearance, rockeries, and are built into later structures, one in a kitchen wall and others in the foundations of a bridge and a castle. Many may have come from destroyed burial mounds; others have been quarried from outcrop. Some of the most interesting have been placed, perhaps deliberately, in later prehistoric structures, where, perhaps, their significance lingered on.

The database for Britain is increasing at a satisfying pace, with new areas of the north being investigated. A major part of West Yorkshire is soon to be published, and the North Yorkshire Moors are revealing more rock art. We are also moving towards a more standardised policy for recording, examining the threats to rock art and considering how it should be displayed. To one who has spent many years enjoying the search, that is a great bonus.



Figure 6 Beanley Moor

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