

ART. II – *Excavations on a Cup-and-Ring marked boulder on Tortie Hill, Midgeholme Parish (NY 589578) and a newly discovered decorated rock in the vicinity (NY 588578).*

By COLIN RICHARDSON, B.A., M.Phil.

Tortie I

THIS important decorated boulder was first reported to Tullie House Museum by Mrs J. Waldron of Hallbankgate, in March 1987, and recorded by the present writer shortly afterwards.

The carvings on the stone have been described and illustrated by Frodsham,¹ but more recent work has revealed considerably more artificial markings on the surface of the boulder than those previously noted. A series of photographs taken under varying light conditions and in conjunction with a wax-rubbing, shows cup-marks covering much of the surface (Fig. 1).²

Prior to excavation, the boulder appeared to be either bedded into a low turf-covered mound, or, had functioned as a nucleus round which cairn material had accumulated. A decision was taken to investigate this mound and its relationship to the boulder.

During earlier field-walking a large glacial erratic was recorded on the fell opposite the Tortie Stone in August 1988. A series of surface markings are almost certainly artificial and observations on this stone are included in this note.

The Site

The area is one of rough fell pasture which gives way to short-cropped grass in the immediate vicinity of the Tortie Stone. There are stones of varying size lying in the field, some almost completely buried, and it has been suggested that a number of them are possible artificial settings and alignments.³ Space forbids a detailed description of these features, except to note the presence of one small standing stone which appears to have an artificial cup-mark on the upper surface.

Tortie I is situated on a south-west facing slope and is aligned north-south on its longitudinal axis. The rock is a creamy-yellow sandstone with the surface weathered to a variety of hues from dull red to mid-grey with a lichen cover in many places. The dimensions of the boulder prior to turf removal were; Max.L. 183 cm (north-south); Max.W. 110 cm (east-west); Max.Ht. above modern ground level 51 cm. The boat-shaped mound measured 5.6 metres in length, 3.0 metres in width and 0.3 metres in height. Following the removal of the turf and soil cover, the exposed stone cairn measured 1.6 metres in length and 1.4 metres in width.

Limestone and fine-grained sandstone predominated amongst the rock types found on the site with a fair sprinkling of igneous stones especially pink granite.⁴ Fragments of quartz were encountered at all levels in the mound and in the excavated sectors.

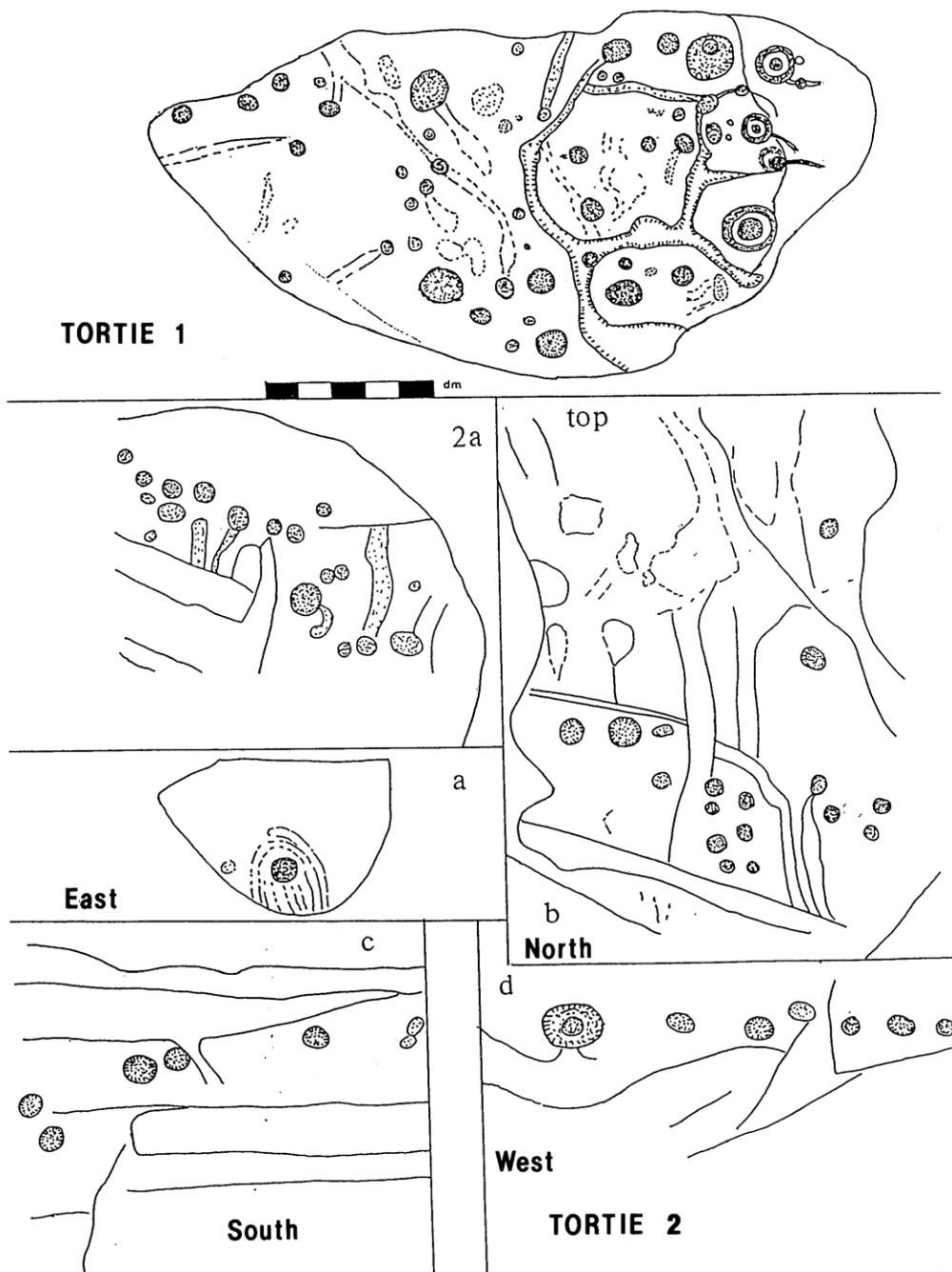


FIG. 1. Tortie 1 : plan view of the decorated surface. Tortie 2 : cups and grooves on the faces of the rock.

The Excavation

The work was undertaken in November 1988, and an initial area measuring 3.0×2.0 metres was stripped on the north side of the Tortie Stone where the mound material survived to its maximum height.

The soil profile consisted of a turf cover with dense root matt and a finely textured soil varying in colour from dark to mid-brown. Below this was a layer of dirty sandy-yellow soil containing small stones and with some root penetration. Soil from this layer filled the interstices in the cairn body with occasional pockets of grey soil resulting from prolonged leaching. Yellow boulder clay containing varying sizes of water-worn stones lay below the cairn material and was present over the whole of the excavated area at an average depth of 16 cm below the modern turf line. In order to check that this was not re-deposited material, test-holes were dug at various points adjacent to and up to 8 metres beyond the boulder and at depths up to 0.75 metre. This confirmed the virgin nature of the glacial deposit.

The cairn stones in the north facing spread revealed no evidence of deliberate construction and appeared to be the result of either gradual accumulation or surface clearance. However, there was a tendency for larger stones to form a core with smaller stones towards the perimeter, and it may be unwise to dismiss entirely the possibility that the Tortie mound was a "structure" of some antiquity with the boulder as a nucleus.⁵

Area stripping in the east, west and southern sectors uncovered a considerable number of rounded and angular stones of varying sizes and rock types. Apart from a concentration of large stones on the west and north-west sides of the boulder, there was nothing to suggest intentional construction. Some of the more substantial angular blocks (average size $50 \times 30 \times 20$ cm) were well-bedded in the underlying boulder clay.

Following removal of the surrounding cairn material, it was with some surprise that a socket-hole was discovered partly obscured by and extending beyond the northern half of the Tortie Stone. The edge of the socket was clearly defined and contained a fill of friable sandy-yellow and grey coloured soil with small stones and flecks of charcoal. A series of angular stones set on edge and firmly entrenched on the north side of the hole had functioned as packing stones. The cleaned-out socket was 40 cm deep below the old ground surface with a rim measurement of 75×130 cm. The position of the socket suggests it was the flattish north end of the boulder which had been inserted into the ground. The boulder clay in the bottom of the socket would have provided a natural "cushion" for the stone upright and would not have required the use of back-filled clay as in the case of the Goggleby Stone.⁶ The yellow and grey fill soil was identical to that in the upper layers and had been used to pack the socket-hole.

There were few finds resulting from the excavation. Fragments of coal were found immediately below the turf line and lying on the surface of the boulder clay. This was hardly surprising in view of the coal outcrops in the locality and drift mining along the hill slopes to the south. Flecks and small pieces of charcoal were found in the cairn body and adjacent areas, and on the surface of the boulder clay. Two concentrations were noted in natural depressions in the old ground surface close to the north-east corner of the boulder, although insufficient in quantity for sampling. Scatters of charcoal and concentrations have been recorded at a number of Cumbrian

sites, including Birrel Sike.⁷ In the present case it may well be the result of vegetation clearance.

Two fragments of pottery were recovered from the soil and root matt below the turf cover, one of which is a body sherd in a buff-coloured fabric with traces of yellow-green glaze on the exterior surface and dating from the 13th–14th century A.D.

Conclusion

Rock carvings on single upright monoliths are far less common in the British Isles than those which have been incorporated into field monuments or appear on rock outcrops. This generality applies to both Passage Grave art and to cups-and-rings. In the Border Counties region, cups-and-rings are primarily found on rock outcrops, cist slabs and in burial mounds and only very rarely on single standing stones.⁸ The scarcity of rock art from Cumbria is well-known and is summarised by Frodsham,⁹ and only Asper's Field, Goggleby Stone (?), Kirksanton and Long Meg, can be regarded as upright stones still *in situ* and displaying cups or cups-and-rings.

There is insufficient archaeological evidence to chart the history of the Tortie Stone in any great detail in the remote past. The boulder may be the sole survivor from a Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age circle, or, an isolated megalith which stood originally in an upright position. Following its collapse, rock-carvers then decorated the upper surface of the recumbent stone. Alternatively, the boulder is a glacial erratic which was decorated by Late Neolithic or earlier Bronze Age people as it lay in the prone position. It was then pulled upright and at a later date fell over as a result of natural subsidence or human agency. The fact that the main carvings at the northern edge would be buried in the socket-hole and thus obscured, does not necessarily preclude this latter theory. Many carvings have funerary associations and are not visible, while cups-and-rings on standing megaliths have been found buried well below ground level.

The only certain conclusion which can be drawn from the investigation, is that at some time in remote antiquity the Tortie Stone was in an upright position. The boulder then fell in a southerly direction and the absence of packing stones on this side of the socket-hole can be compared with the Goggleby Stone.¹⁰ The monolith gradually sank into the boulder clay under its own weight and over the centuries became a nucleus for an accumulation of stones and soil which formed the cairn.

Tortie 2

This large flat-topped sandstone block has been a favourite picnic spot for local people over the years! The core material, where it is exposed, is a creamy-yellow in colour while the surface is weathered to a mid-grey with patches of lichen adhering. The overall dimensions are: Max.L. 4.3 m; Max.W. 3.0 m; Max.Ht. 1.25 m.

There are no definite artificial markings on the top surface, but elsewhere there are a number of cups and vertical channels (Fig. 1).¹¹ Some of the cups are situated where the sides fall sharply away from the upper surface, especially on the east and west faces. On the south and west sides, the cups are on the vertical rock face and can be compared to

the rows of cups on the rock outcrop at Old Bewick, Northumberland.¹² The cups on the east face are related to artificial grooves.

While it is possible that some of the surface markings are natural formations, the presence of cups and grooves on the steeply-angled and vertical surfaces strongly suggests man-made decoration.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

- ¹ Frodsham, P.N.K., “Two Newly Discovered Cup and Ring Marked Stones from Penrith and Hallbankgate, with a Gazetteer of all known Megalithic Carvings in Cumbria”, *CW2*, lxxxix, 1–19.
- ² I am greatly indebted to Mr Stan Beckensall, F.S.A. for his observations on the Tortie Stone and for producing a wax-rubbing of the surface markings here reproduced as Fig. 1 with his kind permission.
- ³ *CW2*, lxxxix, 4–5; To the east of the Tortie Stone there is a low earth and stone bank running towards Tortie Hill. This bank becomes a double feature in one place. However, in view of the considerable industrial activity in the area (mining and quarrying) a note of caution should be sounded when attributing these surface remains to the remote past.
- ⁴ Trotter, F.M. and Hollingworth, S.E., *The Geology of the Brampton District* (HMSO, 1932), 63–4.
- ⁵ Richardson, C., “Excavations at Birrel Sike, near Low Prior Scales, Calder Valley (NY 0702 0735)”, *CW2*, lxxxii, 17.
- ⁶ Clare, T., “Recent Work on the Shap ‘Avenue’”, *CW2*, lxxviii, 5–15.
- ⁷ Richardson, C., *op.cit.*, 7–27.
- ⁸ Beckensall, S., *Northumberland’s Prehistoric Rock Carvings* (1983), 220, 224; Beckensall, S., *Prehistoric Rock Motifs of Northumberland, vol. 1, Ford to Old Bewick* (1991); Morris, R.W.B., *The Prehistoric Rock Art of Southern Scotland*, B.A.R. British Series 86 (1981); Morris, R.W.B., *The Prehistoric Rock Art of Galloway and the Isle of Man* (1979).
- ⁹ Frodsham, P.N.K., *op.cit.*, 1–19.
- ¹⁰ Clare, T., *op.cit.*, 10.
- ¹¹ I am once again indebted to Stan Beckensall for taking a wax-rubbing of the surface markings and for allowing his drawing to be reproduced here as Fig. 1. He also comments that “the close relationship to this rock and Tortie 1 may link it to an east–west route. The Hartleyburn Common cup-marked stones lie further to the east and it would be useful to examine the large area between sites The possibility of further demonstrating their function as route-markers of nomadic and semi-nomadic people, indicating links with religious and other communal sites, or as territorial and hunting areas, is something that we must continue to consider.” (Pers. comm.)
I would also like to thank Wendy Edwards for producing a wax-rubbing of Tortie 2. This is lodged with the site archive in Tullie House Museum.
- ¹² Beckensall, S., *op.cit.*, (1983), 172–3.

