A RE-DRESSED SADDLE QUERNSTONE FROM MAM TOR

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The type of quernstone illustrated in Fig 1 is so familiar an artefact of prehistory in Britain for a stray find to be unremarkable were it not, first, for the local rarity of such implements and, second, for an interesting feature of this particular example. It was found by the writer in 1989, while surveying erosion of the footpath which crosses the hillfort on Mam Tor. It lay loose among rubble exposed by the path, at the point where it passes between the inturned ramparts of the North Gate of the hillfort — at SK1285883913, near the outer, or northern, end of that entrance-passageway. At this spot, it could have been derived from collapse of either the rampart-revetments or a relatively recent drystone wall which runs the length of the ridge within the hillfort and passes through the North Gate. Either way, the quernstone will already have been in a secondary context before it reached the find-spot. However, given that this is a known site of prehistoric settlement, and that there is no reason to suppose this stone had been taken there after its use for milling, we may reasonably regard Mam Tor as its legitimate provenance.

This quernstone is composed of fine grit, presumably derived from the Millstone Grit, which outcrops extensively around Mam Tor. It is the nether stone of a saddle quern, and would have been used in conjunction with a smaller upper stone, or 'rider' (Curwen, 1937: 135-7). It is complete except for damage confined to two parts: along the upper, or grinding surface, of one

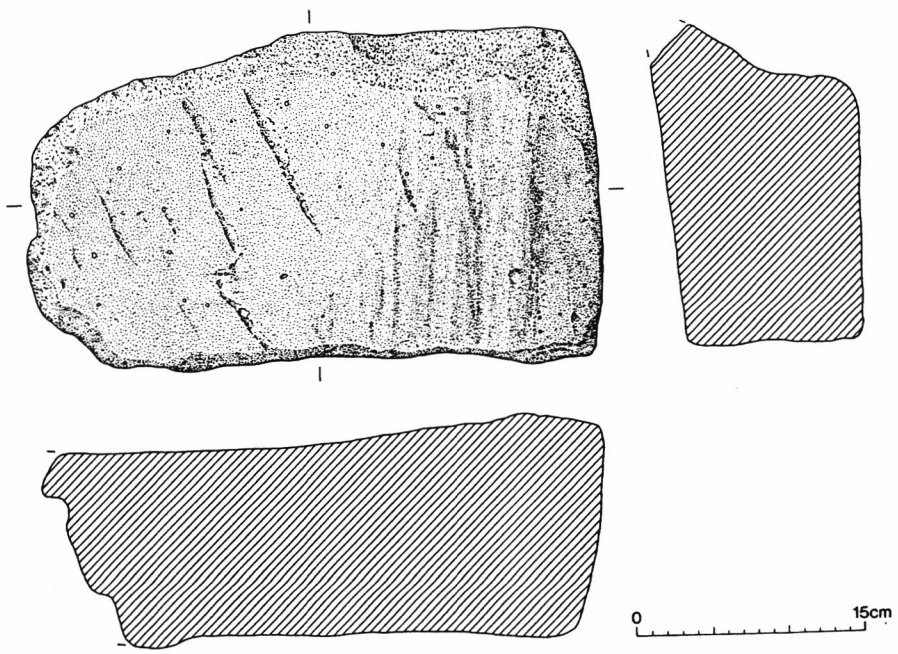

Fig 1 Saddle quernstone found on Mam Tor, at 1:5.

long edge, and from top to bottom of one end (at the top and left respectively in Fig 1). The underside is undamaged and flattish, and apparently unmodified from the naturally-weathered surface of the block. The damaged long side is also otherwise unmodified. The undamaged side and end each appear to retain none of the original surface but to have been squared up, though no clear signs of the actual tooling are detectable. Presumably it began as an irregular boulder of convenient size and was adapted to suit the intended purpose; but it must always have been trapeziform rather than rectangular, since it tapers slightly towards what is now the damaged end.

The surviving area of the grinding surface measures up to 370mm x 185mm. The undamaged end of the long axis has a distinct bevel, as is common in such quernstones (eg Garton and Beswick, 1983: 35), resulting from the method of use of the rider in a to-and-fro motion, so that it would frequently have overridden the end furthest from the user. The remainder of the grinding surface is concave on the long axis, though not as exaggeratedly as is often the case, and more or less flat on the short axis, which is not unusual (cf Curwen, 1937: 135). The fineness of the gritstone means that the grinding surface is generally smooth, with little of the pitting which can make coarser rocks from the Millstone Grit Series so suitable for trapping the grain during milling. This seems to have led to more than one attempt to roughen the surface of this quernstone artificially: it displays shallow, undulating, transverse lines over an area adjacent to the bevel, as well as a series of less regular and rather deeper grooves spaced widely and a little obliquely over the entire surface, including one on the bevel. The shallower fluting appears partly worn away, the scattered grooves less so. It may be that here is evidence for the repeated furbishment of the grinding surface, in order to keep it sufficiently rough to function.

Similar treatment is perhaps witnessed by the collection of saddle quernstones from the hillfort at Breedon-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire. Given the degree of concavity of their grinding surfaces, renovation of heavily-used stones seems a more likely explanation for the parallel rows of transverse 'pecking', observed on those four stones, than does 'little use' (*pace* Wacher, 1964: 132-5).

Saddle quernstones are rare finds in the Peak District, and none was recovered during the excavations at Mam Tor in the 1960s (Coombs and Thompson, 1979). Ball Cross hillfort yielded two examples from the fill of the ditch, when excavated in the 1950s (Stanley, 1954: 98; Whitaker, 1974: 58). Occupation of Ball Cross is generally considered to date from the latest Bronze Age or earliest Iron Age on account of characteristic potsherds from those excavations, though the report provides scant information on their contexts or associations (Stanley, 1954: 91, 93-4, 97-8, Fig 3; and see Challis and Harding, 1975: 51-2, Fig 3; Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 46-7, 49; Hart, 1981: 75). In view of the wealth of broadly-comparable pottery from Mam Tor itself (Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 30-47), this may seem the most obvious dating for this saddle quernstone too; though it may well be that occupation here continued later into the Iron Age, despite the lack of diagnostic artefacts among the excavated material.

Where such unstratified objects are concerned, a further note of caution is necessary, for the discovery of flintwork on Mam Tor (Pennington, 1877: 43; Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 44-5; and more recently) can alert us to the possibility of an earlier date for this quernstone. By much the same token, the saddle quernstone recovered by field-walking at Mount Pleasant, Kenslow has been supposed to derive from a Neolithic occupation because of the preponderance of material of that age among the artefacts collected there (Garton and Beswick, 1983: 35-6). On the available information, the same might be argued of the quernstones found at Middle Hill, Wormhill (Hart, 1981: 46-7); while the dating of such objects when found even more casually must remain yet more uncertain, such as those reported from Owler Bar, Totley Bents and

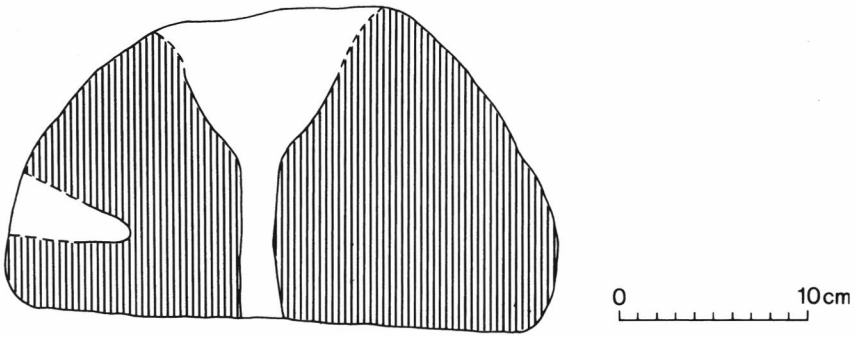

Fig 2 Beehive quernstone found below Mam Tor, at 1:4.

Wharncliffe Chase (Challis and Harding, 1975: 23), each on the eastern fringe of the Peak District.

It may be noted too that a fragmentary upper stone of a rotary beehive quern was found close to the western foot of Mam Tor in 1993. It was discovered by Chris Milner, National Trust warden, during restoration of a drystone wall, at SK125840, on the eastern edge of an extensive tract of landslip, itself evidently of considerable age. However, CM reports that some of the stone used in this operation was collected from another collapsed field-wall, at SK121842, in the midst of the same landslip, and he is uncertain which provenance is valid for the quernstone. Its shape and dimensions will be evident from the cross-section in Fig 2, where it is seen to be an example of the so-called 'Roman legionary', 'Yorkshire', or 'unpierced' form (Curwen, 1937: 148; Caulfield, 1977: 105; Wright, 1988: 66-7). It is broken vertically through the narrow vertical feed-pipe cum spindle-hole, the funnel-shaped hopper, and the lateral handle-socket. The break appears as weathered as the original surface and bore lichen when found, demonstrating that the damage was not done recently. The grinding surface is flat but not level, because it has worn asymmetrically, presumably from use in an oscillating, rather than rotating, action. It is made from medium-coarse gritstone.

Beehive quernstones occur in some numbers in the Peak District and neighbouring areas of the Pennines (Challis and Harding 1975: fig. 98; Hart, 1981: fig. 8.16). Their manufacture is imprecisely datable in the present state of knowledge, and it has lately been recognised that the general type can be attributed to a considerable time-span, including much of the Iron Age as well as much of the Romano-British period (Caulfield, 1977: 107, 124-5; Heslop, 1988: 60-1). Whether the presence of this example below Mam Tor should be taken to imply contemporary occupation upon the landslip is a moot point, not least because much of the stone used for post-medieval walling must have been taken there from neighbouring areas. At any rate, surface inspection by the writer in 1994 located no further artefacts from either possible provenance of this quernstone.

By permission of the landowners, the National Trust, both these quernstones have joined other artefacts from Mam Tor in Sheffield City Museum. It is intended that further reports will follow in due course concerning survey of the hillfort, the repairs to its erosion, and the excavations which these have instigated. Meanwhile, my thanks to Richard Sheppard and Kate Fearn for drawing the saddle and beehive stones respectively.

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