

II

THE EXCAVATION OF A ROCK SHELTER AT CORBY'S CRAGS, EDLINGHAM

Stan Beckensall

THE SITE of the rock shelter is at NU 12800965 on the scarp overlooking the village of Edlingham. The B6341 road from Alnwick (4½ miles) to Rothbury (7½ miles) follows this scarp. A few flint flakes had been found previously on the rock shelter floor, then in July 1975 a pot rim under a slab of stone was discovered by Peter Cheffings. I was called in to investigate this, and excavated the entire floor of the rock overhang. There was little left of the pot, but all the pieces that had been dug out were saved.

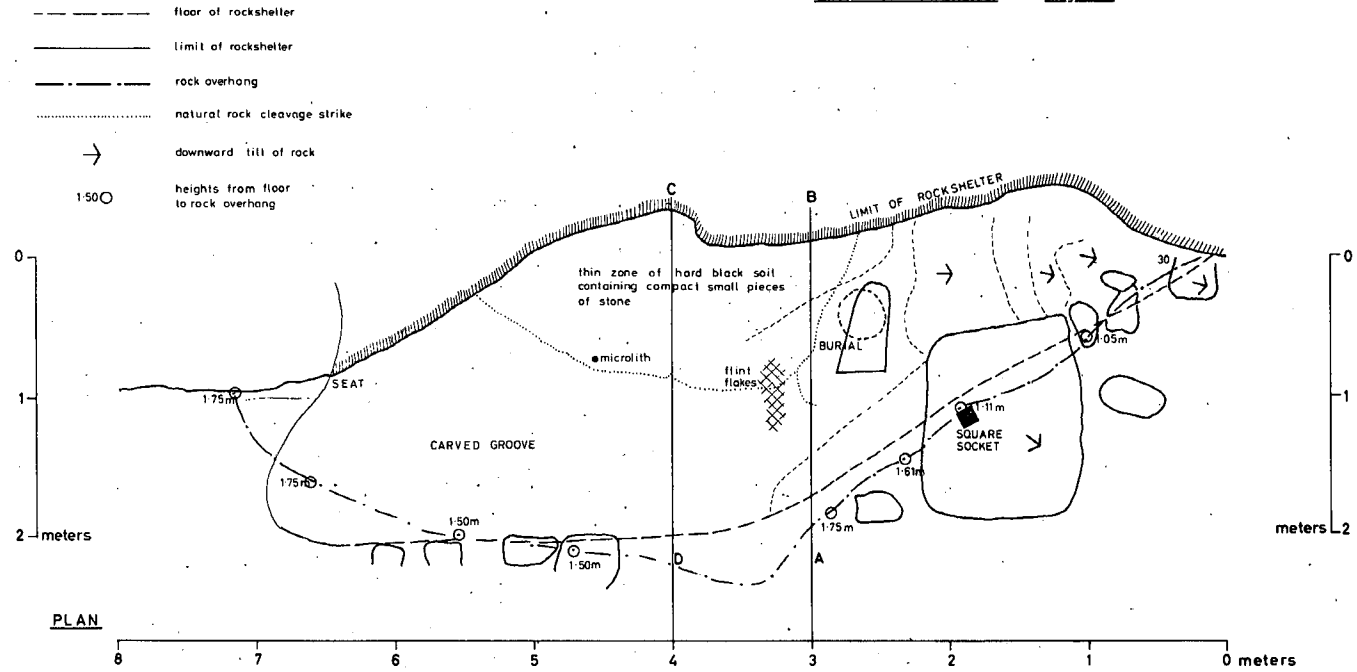
The rock shelter had been used as a flaking floor in Mesolithic times, as a scatter of more than 30 pieces of flint testified. These included a microlith, a thumb scraper, and a borer. In early Bronze Age times a cremation in a food vessel had been buried in the floor of the shelter and covered with a capstone of rock that had been taken from the base rock. On the outside of the rock overhang, a basin and groove with a channel had been carved on the surface. On the floor of the overhang was a carved channel. A large standing stone 5 metres from the cave entrance, another further down the hill, a possible burial mound close by, and a prehistoric enclosure reinforced the importance of the site, especially from a religious point of view. There was evidence of use of the shelter in more recent times. A seat had been chipped out of solid rock at one end, and some little ledges like shelves. There were clay pipe fragments, glass from bottles, a decorated modern cup or bowl, a small knife with a carved wooden handle and some pieces of iron that all suggest a shelter for a shepherd or perhaps for the bell-pit miners.




The Area The fell sandstone scarp, that runs in a SW/NE direction and provides the modern line of communication between Alnwick and Rothbury, commands one of the best views in Northumberland. The Edlingham Burn follows the line of the scarp, and is joined by the Swinhope Burn to the south of the site. To the east and north-east the higher ground behind the rock shelter cuts off the view, but to the west over Lumbey Law Farm, Coe Crag and Thrunton Crag stand out, and beyond them, further north, almost the whole of the Cheviot Hills are visible. To the north is a series of sandstone scarps and slopes, with Ros Castle prominent on the far horizon. These spectacular views have an importance in the choice of this site for a burial: the view from the rock is awe-inspiring.

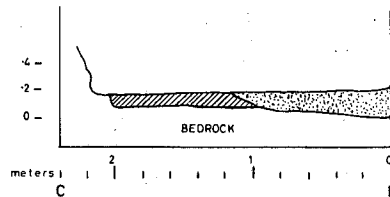
Another interesting feature is that at Lamp Hill and Ros cottages on the road to Alnwick there are prehistoric rock-carvings, and at Millstone Burn to the SSW and Snook Bank there are carvings, standing stones, lines of trackways, and burial

CORBY'S CRAGS, EDLINGHAM.

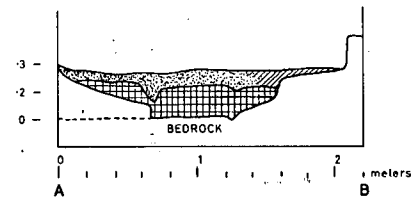
Excavated Rockshelter July 1975



-  fine black soil
-  hard black soil with compact small pieces of stone
-  mottled disturbed soil



SECTION C-D



SECTION A-B

Fig. 1.

mounds—all of which continue to Cragside via Debdon Whitefield—and so on to Lordenshaw (Rothbury). Above Corby's Crags themselves are the possible remains of a stone circle. Until this excavation there had been no reports of Mesolithic finds in the area.

The Rock Overhang The outcrop of rock that forms the overhang is roughly like an upturned basin. The sedimentary layers vary from a coarse gritstone to smooth sandstone, with some iron staining. The overhang is formed by the tilt of the rocks back from a height of about $1\frac{3}{4}$ metres at the entrance. The photograph describes the main features better than words. (See plates I and II.)

The slope on the outside behind the entrance is broken by a wide gap that has been made artificially. At the entrance to the overhang this is approached by artificially made steps. The initials "P" and "S" (Percy and Swinburne) have been carved on the rock near to the gap. The rock lies on the division of land, and the modern fence and boundary markers (one on a hill to the SE has a very old deeply cup-marked and vertically grooved stone alongside) may well lie on a much earlier trackway.

On the SE slope of the rock there is a large basin carved out (43 centimetres across) and surrounded by a groove 64 cm × 50 cm at its outer rim. This elliptical basin and groove, so like the Lordenshaw ones, is penetrated by a channel that is 13 centimetres wide and 3 metres long. Quite clearly this is yet another "cup and ring" site, and its position above a cremation burial of the early Bronze Age reinforces the chronological association of such features.

There are other grooves on the opposite slope of the rock that could well have been started deliberately, and there is another basin, but it is difficult to be so positive because natural erosion could be responsible. Rain would certainly deepen any grooves put there by man. With the basin and ring there is no doubt whatever, as the photograph shows. Why had this feature been unnoticed before? It is difficult to see it—but on my first visit to the site the westering sun obligingly threw it into vivid relief. The position of the sun makes a big difference to how one sees these designs—some are almost invisible without oblique lighting. One other feature that must not go unnoticed: the basin, groove and channel are directed generally at a mound of stones, probably a barrow, below the rock outcrop.

Inside the Rock Shelter The area of the floor was about 12 square metres, with 7 square metres of particular interest. For excavation, a grid was marked out at $\frac{1}{2}$ -metre intervals in the form of a rectangle 6 metres long by 2 metres wide. For recording purposes, there was a portable square metre grid, with intervals of 10 cm stretched across in thin wire.

At the NW end, the rock floor was already exposed, the dip of natural rock going in the opposite direction. A seat had been hacked out of the solid rock, and some small ledges made. The tool marks were very clear (see Plate II, 1). There had also been some hacking at the floor in places with the same tool.

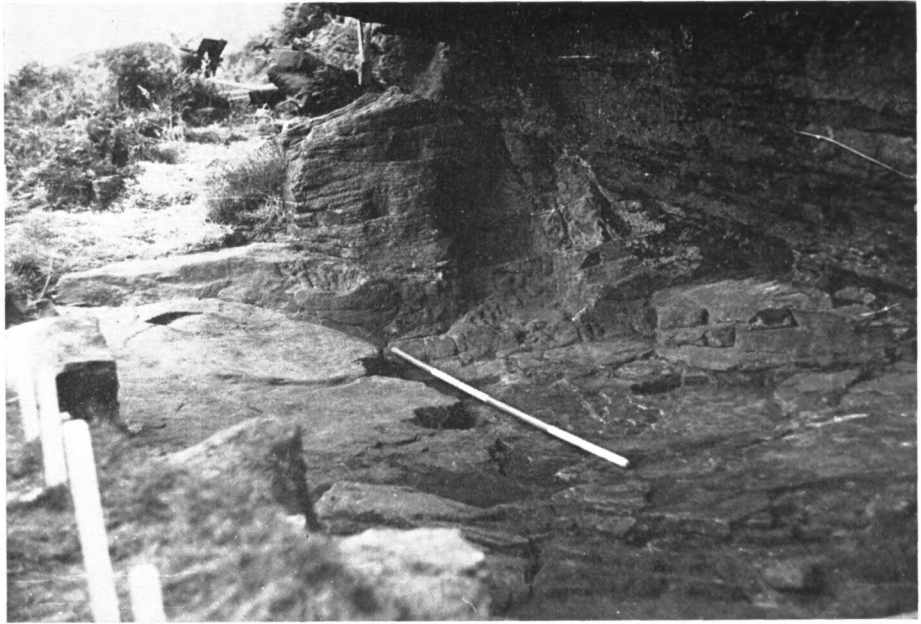
Of quite a different style was the curved groove shown in the photograph. This follows the strike of the rock for some of its course, but curves artificially at the top of the slope. This could be prehistoric. The rest of the floor was covered with



1. Corby's Crag: site before excavation



2. Corby's Crag: prehistoric rock carving



1. Corby's Crag: the site after excavation, showing the bed-rock, and an "arm-chair" cut into the overhang



2. Corby's Crag: detail of the rock-floor, showing the groove (right of the pole) and triangular stone (towards which the pole is pointing)

CORBYS CRAGS July 1975
 Standing Stone S.W. Face.
 5M From Rock Shelter Entrance.

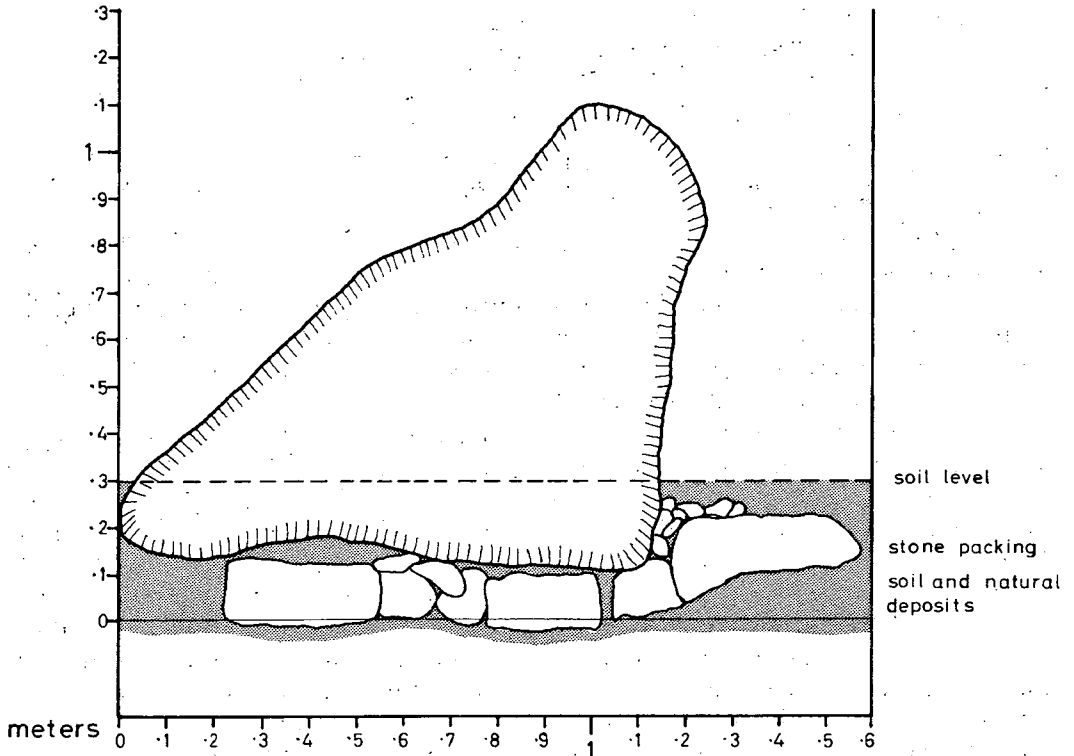


Fig. 2.

dark soil, grass, small stones. The limit of the overhang was marked by a line of stones that proved to be modern. At the SE end the natural rock appeared at floor level. Excavation was done with trowel and brush only. The position of the burial was already known, and Mr. Cheffings had put back the capstone in approximately the same position as he had found it.

Stratigraphy (A) At the back of the overhang was a black, hard, compact mass of soil and small pieces of stone. Finds in this layer were no different from B. There were flint flakes, glass, modern pottery, coal and pieces of quartz.

(B) Most of the top layer was a black soil with small stones and bracken root,

but less compact than A. The colour came from humus and iron staining—not burning. Again this produced a range of finds from flint to modern pottery, with one more concentrated patch of flakes.

(C) The third layer was in the burial area, and had been partly disturbed very recently. The soil was mottled, buff, yellow and grey with small pieces of fresh sandstone. There was bracken root penetration throughout. Towards the base rock the sandstone was yellow.

(D) The bedrock is best seen on Plate II. At the place of the burial some rock had been removed from the floor, presumably to quarry the slab that covered the urn, at the deepest part.

The Excavation of the Burial Urn The slope of the natural bedrock created a kind of sump for water, and this accounts for the lower part of the vessel being so decayed. Having removed the already-disturbed capstone and located the area where the rim and part of the pottery body had been, I worked from the outside towards the hole in which the pot had been placed. In this way it was possible to keep what was left of the base entirely intact and to remove it—along with its soil base and deposit for examination at the university. The pot may have been leaning slightly to one side, under pressure, rim upwards.

The SE end of the shelter was mostly natural rock at a high level, with some broken glass and modern pottery. On one large block a small square had been hollowed out of the rock, and there was a corresponding niche above it in the overhang. It would appear that this was intended for a screen—perhaps a modern shelter? The low wall of stone's clearly lay above the level of the soil in the shelter and was later than the rest.

The Standing Stones The large standing stone 5 metres from the entrance was excavated to see how it was erected. It was not slotted into a trench, but its broad, flat base was wedged into position by flat stones that had been placed at right angles to it. At one end a large "stop" rock had been buried, and the part between that and the end of the monolith packed with small stones. We re-packed the area around the base of the stone. The monolith was not moved at all during the excavation. The second standing stone appeared to be erected in the same way: this has still to be excavated. It rests on a hill slope.

FINDS

Flints Over 30 fragments are now at the Department of Archaeology. Obviously the shelter was used as a flaking floor—some flakes were minute. There were, fortunately, a microlith, a scraper and (?) a borer to make identification of the culture easier.

Burial Urn The rim has a circumference of approx. 60 cm and a diameter of approx. 20 cm. It is turned inward, 3 cm thick and decorated with 3 lines of what look like grain impressions. From the rim to the shoulder is 5 cm, and in this section are lugs running round the pot at 5 cm intervals, each decorated. They have been stuck on and not pinched from the wet clay. Some are missing, their positions being marked by grey patches.

The body has similar grain-type impressions made on very crude and sandy body.

The base was thick (though decayed badly), with a black filling full of grit and brown/orange inside and out.

Among the debris was some bone, and a thick compact mass of material from the cremation.

The Capstone The stone slab that covered the pot is like a triangle rounded at one end. In length 73 cm, base 40 cm, tapering to the rounded apex (20 cm before the curve), it was broken across long ago (the break mark at almost exactly half way being an old one). It is 8 cm thick. It was possible to say that this stone was prised up from the natural base-rock: it has a natural red iron stain at one end that corresponds with a similar colour in the rock at the back of the overhang.

MODERN MATERIAL (All donated to Newcastle Museum)

1. 3 stems of clay pipes, and part of a pipe bowl.
2. Widely scattered green glass.
3. Clear white glass.
4. Decorated tea cup or bowl.
5. Knife with metal blade (like a penknife) and a carved wooden handle.
6. Various pieces of iron (purpose unknown).
7. Piece of thin brown/orange pot, wheel-turned.
8. Small piece of black decorated pot (?).

CONCLUSION One cannot overstress the value of this site:

1. It establishes yet another Mesolithic flaking floor. Until quite recently little was known of this period in Northumberland.
2. It continues to prove the assumption that rock overhangs may well be commonly used for early Bronze Age burials. Colin Burgess' reports on similar sites established this fact.
3. It is a vital link in the chain of cup and ring marked stones that I have already noted. The relationship between standing stone/rock carving/burial and trackways is made even stronger. So is the evidence linking the early Bronze Age with cup and ring markings. The encouragement for further field work in this area is enormous.

THANKS: To the team that helped with the excavation: Ann Pickard, Peter, David and Michael Cheffings, and John Manners. To Tony Oates, who gave permission to excavate on his land. To Dr. Smith and Velson Horie at Newcastle University for their help. Also to Geoffrey Pickard for drawing the plan and sections, and to Mary Hurrell for drawing the pot. This drawing is at the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle.

References

- Stan Beckensall, *The Prehistoric Carved Rocks of Northumberland*. (Frank Graham, 1974) pp. 58-73.
- Colin Burgess, "Goatscrag: a Bronze Age Rock Shelter Cemetery". (*Arch. Ael.* Vol. 50).