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ROCK CARVINGS AT GOATSCRAG ROCK SHELTERS, NORTHUMBERLAND

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GOATSCRAG is a prominent outcrop of Fell Sandstone rising to 167 m and situated about 6 km to the south of Berwick upon Tweed (fig. 1). It is marked on Ordnance Survey maps at NT 977370. The rock shelters, of which there are several, face south over low hills towards the Milfield Plain and beyond to Cheviot. Two were excavated in the late 1960s¹ and the carvings which are the subject of this note are to be found in the more westerly of these, known as Site B in the excavation report. Although contemporary photographs reveal that the carvings were visible at the time of the excavation² they were not recognized as being of archaeological interest until the site was visited by one of the authors (M. van H.) in 1984. In this note we seek to draw attention to their existence and attempt to assess their place in the corpus of North British rock art, although the latter is very difficult.

The carvings are found at the east end of Rock Shelter B on an almost vertical, horizontally bedded frost weathered surface about 1.5 m broad and 2 m high. They face west whereas the shelter itself faces due south (plate IIa). The surface is smooth but divided into several panels by natural cracks and is subject to weathering in the form of "pocking", especially at its exposed southern edge.

The four carvings are at eye level and occupy a space about 0.5 m by 0.4 m. They have been made by battering the surface of the rock, probably with a pointed stone, to form a series of conjoined depressions. As such the effect is quite like the natural weathering noted elsewhere on the rock face and there is a distinct possibility that some parts of the carvings may have originated as natural depressions which were extended and developed in accordance with the requirements of the design. Each carving consists of a series of horizontal and vertical elements arranged so as to leave little doubt that they are representations of quadrupeds seen in profile (fig. 2; plate IIb). In each case the head appears to be indicated at the left end of the figure which gives the impression that they are all moving or facing the same way, that is into the rock shelter. They are arranged in a single line of three with a fourth solitary figure above and a little to the right beyond a natural fissure. Each will now be described in turn beginning with the figure leading the file of three.

The leading figure is the largest of the group and has a body 105 mm long with rear and fore limbs of 95 mm and 75 mm respectively. The head and neck are shown as a vertical element some 60 mm long projecting from the body at right angles immediately above the fore limbs. At the top are a pair of protuberances which at first sight might be taken to represent a head seen in profile. However, as this feature is

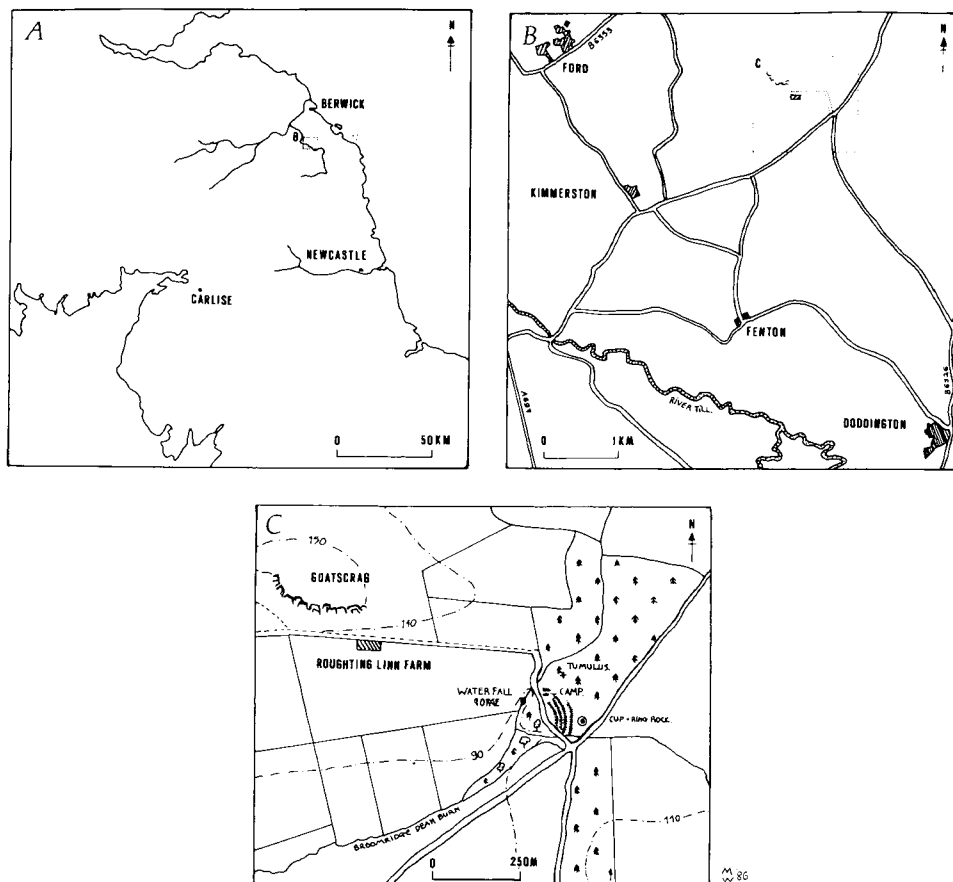


Fig. 1.

missing from the other figures it is more likely that it is intended to represent some adornment to the head such as horns or antlers. The second figure is similar in design to the first, though a little smaller and lacking any indication of horns or antlers. Both of these figures are associated with single circular pock marks above their backs. While these marks could be the result of natural weathering similar marks are mainly absent from the carved rock face and the juxtaposition of these two marks and two of the carvings seems more than a coincidence. We assume they are part of the design.

The third figure at the right hand end of the file, differs from the other two in the way in which the head and neck are represented. Instead of a vertical element rising directly from the line of the back in this case the body is extended beyond the fore limbs and the head shown by a short (35 mm) zone of carving arranged diagonally to this. Allowing for the limitations of the medium and method this does provide a reasonably convincing representation of a head in profile. This third figure has a substantial protuberance about half way along its back. Whilst this could be a third



a) Shelter B at Goatscrag, Northumberland.



b) Carving of four quadrupeds at Goatscrag.

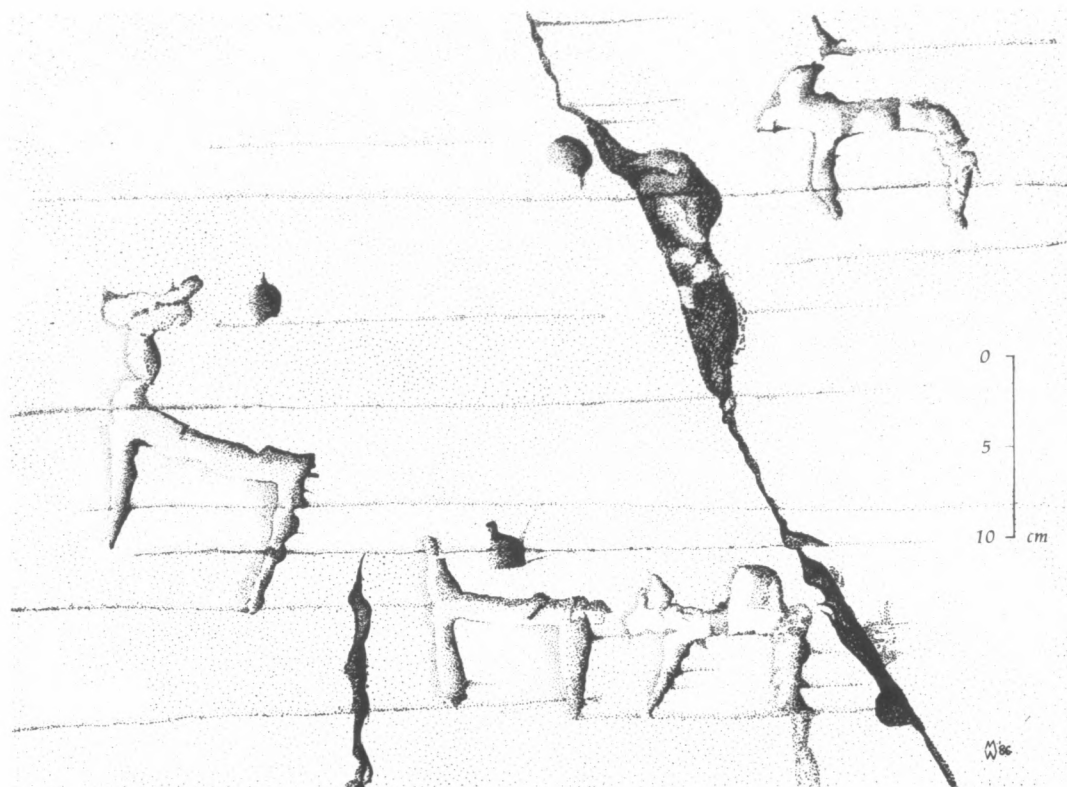


Fig. 2.

circular element similar to those noted above the backs of the first and second figures this actually cojoins the line of the back and may be no more than a fortuitous flaking of the rock surface during work on the figure itself.

The fourth, solitary, figure is similar to the third, particularly in the treatment of its head, though in this case there is a hint of a protuberance from the top of the head which may be an attempt to show horns or antlers in profile. However, it must be admitted that this is not particularly convincing and the marks in question could well be natural weathering.

We believe there is little reason to doubt that all four figures were carved at the same time and that the scene should be considered as a whole. We have already noted that stylistically there are two types of figure; the first and second and the third and fourth. We feel that the most likely explanation for the differences between them are ones of gender. However, it is very difficult to be dogmatic as to which are male and which female without having a better idea of species represented. The most likely candidates are cattle, deer or goats. Their gracile form seems to make the first of these possibilities rather less likely than either of the other two while the extent of the

putative sexual dimorphism argues more in favour of deer than goats, though the latter of course have the place-name on their side. Either way the first figure, being the largest, is presumably male and on grounds of stylistic similarity this interpretation can also be applied to the second, though its smaller size and the absence of horns or antlers suggest a juvenile may be intended. The association of the additional circular carvings with the two putatively male figures may also be significant. Finally, it should also be noted that the first two figures have rather static poses whereas those of the others seem more animated and it may be that the artist has attempted to show a small herd partly in motion. In summary we believe the scene shows a small herd of deer or goats led by a mature male and including at least two females.

Date and Affinities

The dating of mural or parietal art is notoriously difficult, the only satisfactory situations being those rare cases where the art is itself partly buried by deposits which can be dated archaeologically. But even in these favourable circumstances the date provided can only be said to be a *terminus ante quem*. Although the excavations at Goatscrag revealed deposits of Early Bronze Age and putatively Mesolithic date³ these cannot in any way be used to date the carvings which are found over a metre above the level of the floor.

The only firm evidence of date we have is that provided by the photographs taken during the late 1960s which show that the carvings were present at that time. Close inspection of the figures themselves shows their edges to be rounded and well-worn, an indication of considerable antiquity in itself. The use of a stone hammer as opposed to a metal implement also argues for an early date as does the subject matter. The Fell Sandstones of Northumberland are particularly easy to carve and engrave and they have attracted the attention of graffiti artists for many generations. Many of these comparatively recent carvings include dates and we have been able to examine a series of examples spanning a period of nearly two centuries. All of these have been cut with metal tools and almost without exception consist of groups of initials in addition to a date. Figurative elements are found only very rarely and these usually consist of a heart or some other human organ. For these reasons we do not feel that the Goatscrag animal carvings are likely to be particularly recent in date. Similar arguments also make a medieval date unlikely. Although animal art was relatively common in the Middle Ages it rarely occurs in such an informal context while medieval graffiti usually involve elements of Christian symbolism, the cross being the most common.

Apart from the abundant and well known Late Neolithic and Bronze Age "cup-and-ring" carvings rock art is rare in Northern Britain and parallels for the Goatscrag carvings are hard to find. There is, however, a small group of animal carvings considered to be of Iron Age, Romano-British or Early Medieval date found in a zone extending across Southern Scotland from Argyll and Arran to Fife. Representations include deer, fish and various indeterminate quadrupeds and birds.⁴ These carvings are found on exposed rock faces and in caves and rock shelters. One deer, that found carved on a boulder in Glen Domhain, Argyll,⁵ is particularly interesting because the animal appears to be a male and the design includes a small

circular carving immediately above the centre of its back, precisely as in the case of the first and second figures at Goatscrag. However, from the published illustrations these carvings all appear to have been engraved in outline rather than "pocked-in" in block form as at Goatscrag and in most cases appear to be considerably more sophisticated representations of the creatures concerned.

It is in this corpus of North British animal art that the subject matter of the Goatscrag carvings finds its closest parallels although the ensemble effect is generally lacking from the other sites reported. Thomas⁶ has described this material as "... a vigorous naturalistic or semi-naturalistic animal art, in which a horned animal seems to be predominant, ...". According to Thomas this tradition can be shown to have existed from the 1st century B.C. onwards, and to have survived throughout the first two or three centuries A.D., whereas Wace and Jehu⁷ favoured a somewhat later date in the 9th and 10th centuries. In neither of these periods is there any evidence for activity at Goatscrag independent of the carvings themselves.

The main period represented archaeologically at Goatscrag is the Early Bronze Age during which a series of cremations, two in Enlarged Food Vessels, were deposited in Rock Shelter A.⁸ On technical and stylistic grounds the best parallels for the carvings in Rock Shelter B are to be found in the rock art of the Scandinavian Bronze Age and Gelling and Davidson⁹ illustrate numerous scenes including quadrupeds drawn in block form as at Goatscrag. However, the main centres of Scandinavian rock art are a long way from Northumberland and the absence of any other examples in Britain make us reluctant to advance the Scandinavian material as a serious parallel for the Goatscrag carvings.

The excavations also produced evidence of possible Mesolithic activity represented by a few struck flints including a broken microlith.¹⁰ In his original publication of the Glen Domhain deer Childe¹¹ suggested that comparisons could be drawn with the figurative rock art of the Stone Age hunting and gathering societies of Norway and Northern Sweden and, by implication, the entire circumpolar zone of the Old World. This suggestion can be repeated in the case of the Goatscrag carvings but we are again faced with the problems of the remoteness of these areas from Goatscrag and the absence of British parallels of comparable antiquity.

Certainty as to the date and affinities of the Goatscrag carvings is an impossibility but economy of hypothesis leads us to suggest that they be accepted within the corpus of North British animal art which is at present dated to the period between the 1st century B.C. and the 4th century A.D. However, it has to be admitted that none of these animals carved on rock faces and in caves can be directly dated and the chronological range proposed is based on comparisons with mobile objects said to be similarly decorated and found in archaeologically dated contexts. Not all of these comparisons are entirely convincing and an earlier dating for some or all of these carvings cannot be completely ruled out.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Melanie Whewell for drawing Figures 1 and 2, the latter based on an original rubbing made by her at Goatscrag.

NOTES

- ¹ Burgess, 1972.
² Burgess, pers. comm.
³ Burgess, 1972.
⁴ Thomas, 1963, 21–5; Morris, 1977, 85; Morris, 1981, 9 fig. 10; Wace and Jehu, 1915, 242–4, fig. 7; Edwards, 1933, 171–5, figs. 6 and 7.
⁵ Childe, 1941, 290–1; Morris, 1977, 85.
⁶ Thomas, 1963, 27.
⁷ Wace and Jehu, 1915, 242.
⁸ Burgess, 1972.
⁹ Gelling and Davidson, 1972
¹⁰ Burgess, 1972.
¹¹ Childe, 1941.

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