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THE ROCK CARVINGS AT ROUGHTING LINN, NORTHUMBERLAND

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INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to present a detailed record of the rock carvings at Roughting Linn, Northumberland. The carvings are well-known and belong to the important group of carvings lying between the Tweed and Tyne rivers in north-east England. A catalogue and discussion of the sites has been published by Beckensall (1983).¹ The Roughting Linn carvings are the most extensive of the whole group but no detailed record of the Roughting Linn carvings has been published since 1865.²

THE DRAWINGS

The carvings occur in four main areas of the stone. The carvings were recorded by placing sheets of cellophane over the carved areas and then tracing the carvings onto the cellophane with a felt-tipped pen. The varying depths and state of preservation of the carvings were also recorded by annotating the cellophane as appropriate. In the final drawings (figs. 2–5), the depths of the carvings are indicated by the convention of using a close stipple for deep carvings and a more open stipple for shallow carvings. The carvings are all quite weathered and it is not possible to detect the actual pickmarks which would have been present when the carvings were first made. The stipple used to indicate the depth of the carvings should not, therefore, be taken as showing actual pickmarks on the rock. A complete plan of the rock was also made; this shows the overall shape of the rock and the positions of the four areas where the detailed drawings were done (fig. 1). The carvings are shown at a scale of 1:25 on Figs. 2–5.

PREVIOUS WORK AT ROUGHTING LINN

According to George Tate,³ the carvings at the site (which he spelled Routing Linn) were discovered in 1852 by no less distinguished an antiquary than Rev. Canon William Greenwell. During that summer, Tate and Greenwell cleared a 9" depth of turf off part of the site to expose more carvings and in August Greenwell described them at a meeting of the Archaeological Institute at Newcastle.⁴ In October of the same year, Tate submitted sketches to a meeting of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club. In 1858 Tate was requested by the Club to prepare an illustrated paper on the carvings; this was presented to the Club in 1864 and published in their proceedings of

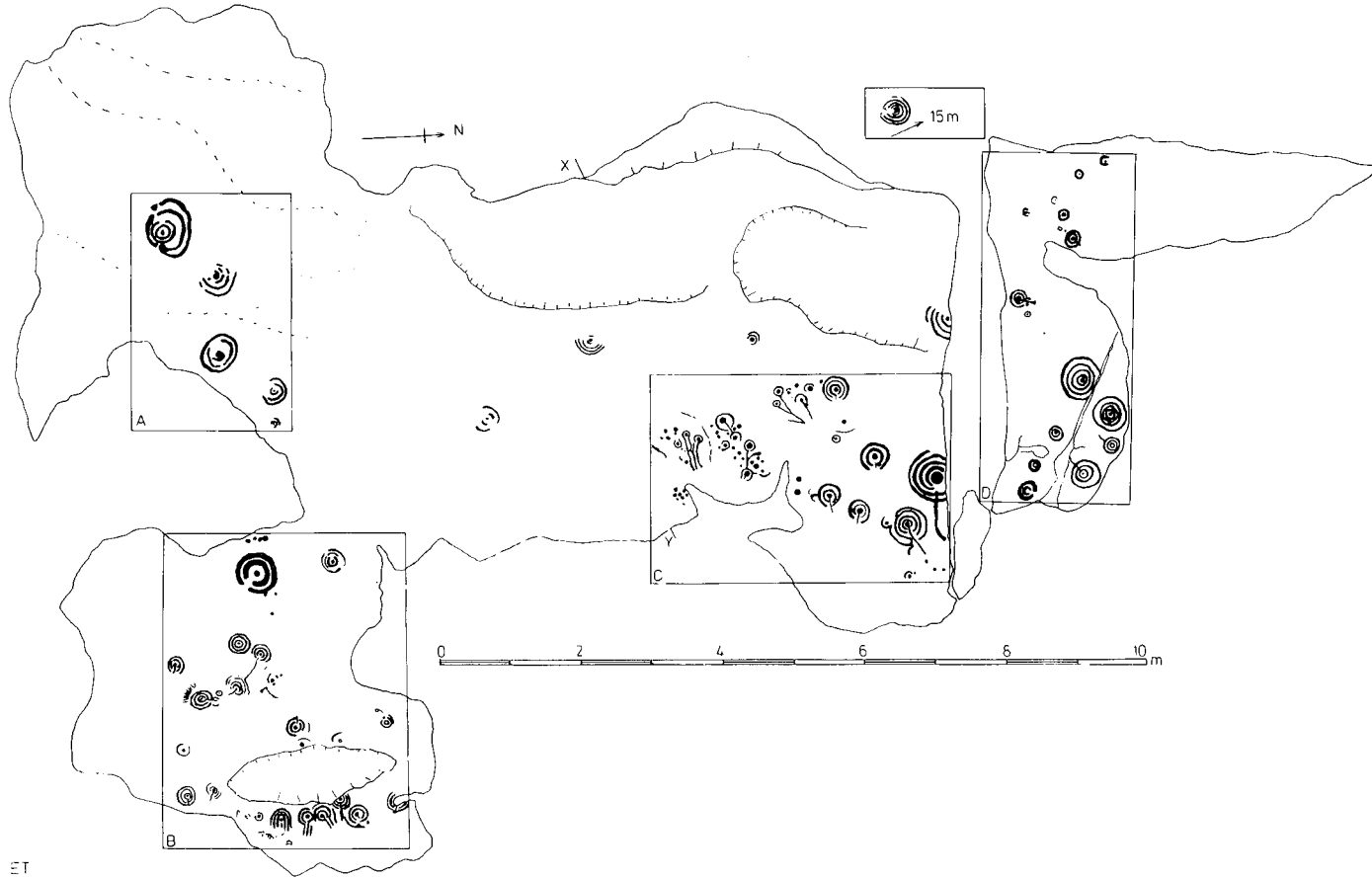


Fig. 1. Overall plan of rock outcrop, Roughting Linn, showing position of the four main areas for which detailed drawings were made.

that year and it was published as a separate monograph the following year. Most of the drawings for the paper were made by John Storey under Tate's direction.⁵ That of Roughting Linn is very well drawn, at a scale of 1:48. In 1868 Mr. Collingwood Bruce published drawings which had been commissioned by the 4th Duke of Northumberland. Northumbrian rock art has been studied intermittently since the time of these first discoveries, in recent years mainly by Beckensall in 1974⁶ and 1983⁷ and more briefly by van Hoek⁸ who published a sketch of the carvings at Roughting Linn.

The Site (NT 984367)

The site lies at the northern end of the Northumbrian group of rock carving.⁹ The rock consists of a coarse-grained sandstone, called Fell sandstone; almost all the Northumbrian carvings occur on this type of rock.

The rock lies at just over 300' above O.D. and is, therefore, quite low lying by comparison with the majority of carvings; the nearest carvings occur at about 500' O.D., at Goatscrag Hill, a half mile north-west and on Doddington North Moor three-quarters of a mile south-east.

A stream called the Broomridgedean Burn or Roughting Linn stream flows just east of the rock. A waterfall on the stream gives the name to the area, from "roughting" meaning "Bellowing" and "Linn" from the Celtic word for pool. A promontory fort is built just west of the rock and to the north the site of a tumulus is recorded.

The carvings are found on a single large rock outcrop which measures 19.5 m north-south \times 12 m east-west. However, just to the north-east are a few small outcrops on one of which a set of five concentric circles is carved. Parts of the rock are overgrown with turf and excavation might reveal further carvings. The rock slopes gently down from west to east. There is an incline of 1:6 between X and Y on Fig. 1 and at the southern end it slopes down steeply. The rock has been quarried in several places; at X on Fig. 1, it dips sharply by 125 cm and some of the most interesting carvings have been damaged by quarrying at the south-east corner of the rock.

THE CARVINGS

The position of the carvings can best be seen by reference to Fig. 1. The general plan also shows the principal natural features of the rock and the weathered areas. The severe reduction of scale on this plan necessitated the simplification of the representation of the carvings. Only a few isolated carvings occur on the central part of the rock; these are very weathered and some carvings in this area may have become obliterated through weathering. However, all the carvings published by Tate¹⁰ can still be found.

Area A (fig. 2)

The carvings in this section occur on an area of rock which falls away steeply to the south. All this part of the rock is heavily weathered. It is more coarse grained than the rest of the rock and there are several nodular protrusions which are heavily impregnated with iron. Just to the north of the carvings is an area about 6 m² which is covered with solution hollows (stippled on fig. 1). The way in which some of these are undercut suggests that their present shape results mainly from rainwater erosion in

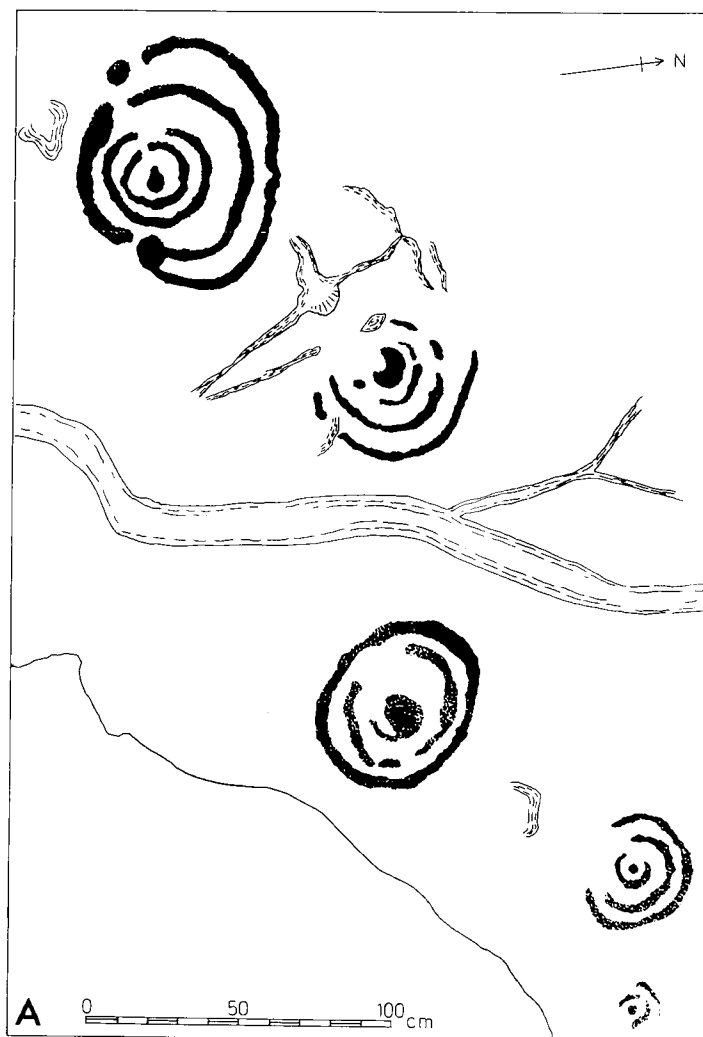


Fig. 2. Area A, Roughting Linn.

the hollows. Because of the weathering, it is not possible to decide if these are natural or if they were artificially deepened at some time. The same problem arises in regard to the three deep channels and some further shallower ones which run down this part of the rock. They measure up to 10–12 cm in width and are up to 10 cm deep; like the hollows, they now appear more natural than artificial but the degree of weathering makes it impossible to determine if they were deepened by man at some time.

The definite carvings in this area are all heavily weathered. This gives the impression that they were crudely carved and indeed their shapes are decidedly irregular. Five sets of concentric circles of varying size are clearly identifiable and there is a possible further circle just west of the largest set (not drawn). Tate and

Beckensall both mention the carvings in Area A, but neither included them in their drawings of the rock. The crudeness of these carvings by comparison with those on the rest of the rock may be due to the different composition of the stone here.

Area B

This is the south-east corner of the rock and contains some of the most interesting carvings; unfortunately a large wedge of rock has been cut out near the eastern edge and some sections of the carvings have been damaged.

The western part of this area has a line of four cupmarks and a set of concentric circles, all of which are deeply cut and weathered in a similar way to the carvings in Area A. In the centre of the area are a series of cup and circle carvings, some with radiating channels, and amongst these is the well-known design of a set of three circles with central cup, radiating line and a border of eleven short radiating lines running around the outer-most circle for about one quarter of its circumference. Near the eastern edge there is a series of gapped circles with radiating lines; with these is an unusual variant where three concentric or boxed U's enclose a cupmark and a radiating line. The radiating lines of all the motifs in this group run downhill towards the edge of the stone.

Area C

This lies in the north-east section of the rock and contains a good series of concentric circles and cupmarks. Several of the circles have radiating lines running out from the cupmark or from the outermost rings. In the south part of this area are two cups, each with a single gapped ring, from the terminals of which two lines run outwards.

Area D

This is near the northern end of the rock and is separated from the main rock by a quarried section. Again the designs are principally concentric circles with cupmarks. One set has two cupmarks neatly placed with one on each side of the line radiating from the centre.

THE MOTIFS

The main motif used at Roughting Linn was that of a cup with concentric circles. In all there are about 60 examples of this motif, most of which are either gapped or have a line radiating out from the circle or both. An approximate count gives 24 sets of cups and one circle, 15 with cup and two circles, 14 with cup and three circles and 8 with cup and four circles. The only set with five concentric circles is an isolated carving on a separate outcrop about 15 m to the north-west. There are also about 60 individual or grouped cupmarks, most of them in Area C. The counts are necessarily approximate because of the weathered nature of some of the motifs.

In general the designs are very typical of Northumbrian, and indeed British and Irish rock art generally.¹¹ The most unusual motifs are the boxed arcs and the band of radiating lines in Area B. The other noteworthy feature about the motifs is the range in scale from large sets of circles in Areas A and C and the finer, smaller scale,

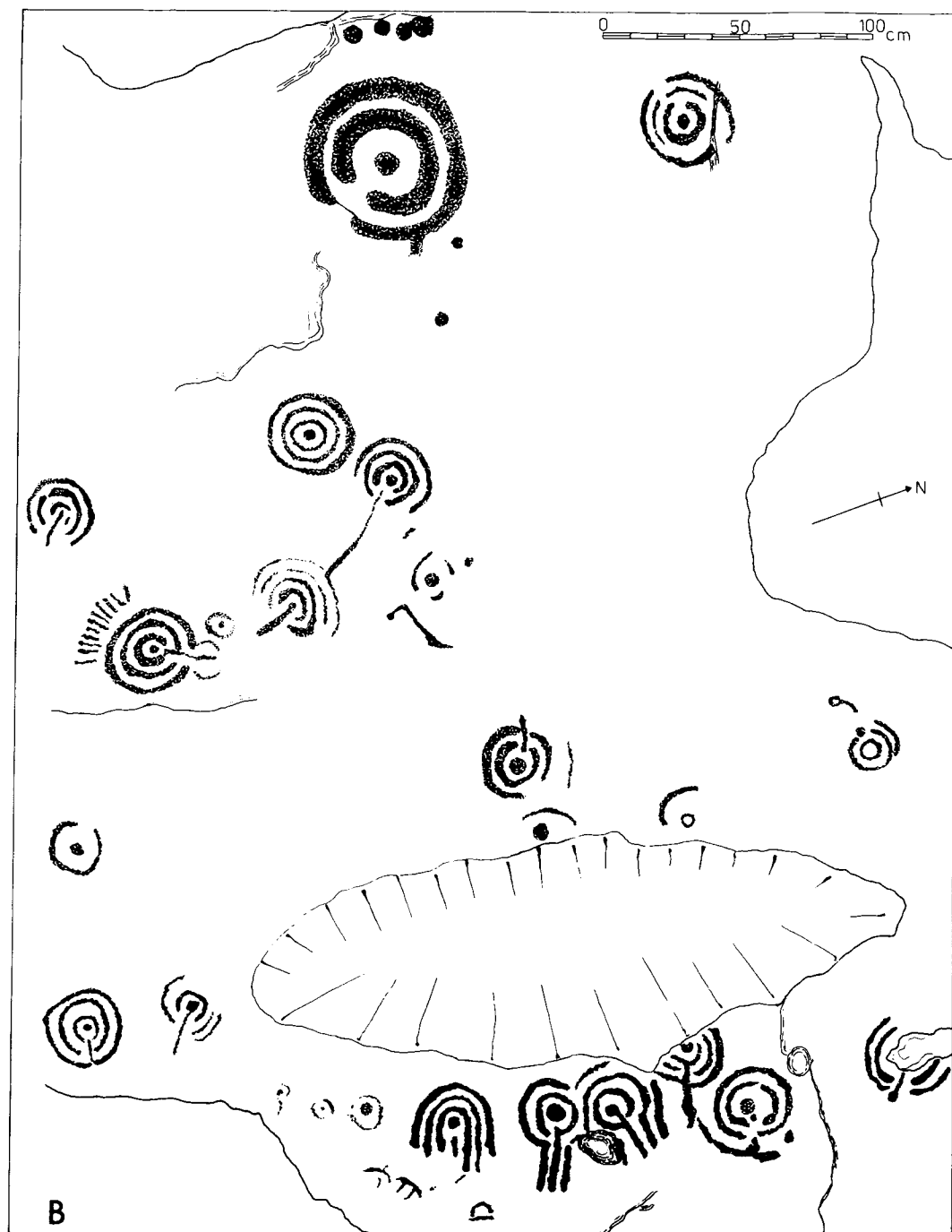


Fig. 3. Area B, Roughting Linn.



Fig. 4. Area C, Roughing Linn.

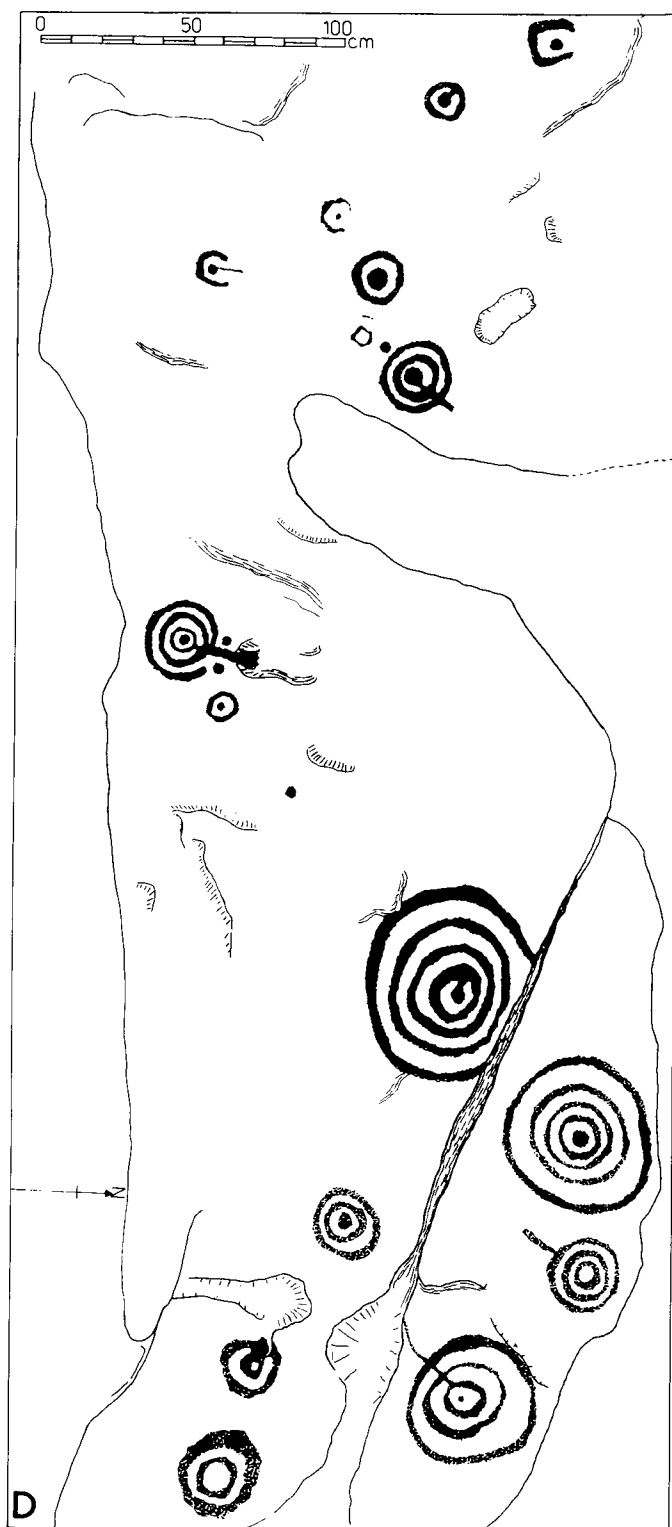


Fig. 5. Area D, Roughing Linn.

carvings of Area B. Clearly a number of hands were at work, and probably at different times.

COMPARANDA AND DISCUSSION

The rock at Roughting Linn is the largest carved rock in Northumberland. As noted above, the carvings are typical of the area, with one or two unusual motifs. One of the puzzling features of the site is the southern part, with its solution hollows and deep channels. On present appearance, these look natural. However, the definitely man-made circles in this area are noticeably more weathered than those on the rest of the rock, owing probably to a different rock composition. The possibility that the hollows and channels originated as man-made features, or were deepened by man, cannot, therefore, be ruled out.

What appear to be natural grooves and hollows in association with artificial carvings occur at Old Bewick main rock¹² and at Lordenshaws main rock.¹³ However on other rocks at Lordenshaws, there are artificially cut channels¹⁴ and deeply cut artificial channels are recorded at a number of other sites, notably Weetwood Moor¹⁵ and Chatton Park site 6¹⁶ where pick-marks can be seen in the part of the channel which runs under the turf. Chatton Park main rock shows an example of artificial deepening of natural faults in the sandstone to produce channels.¹⁷

At a number of sites, therefore, there is association between artificial carvings and natural channels; elsewhere some channels were totally artificial and some natural ones were deepened by carving.

Rock carvings tend to occur in isolated situations, without any archaeological context or associations and they are, therefore, notoriously difficult to explain or to date. However, in Northumberland, there is considerable evidence of the association of rock-carving with burial monuments of the early bronze age. The data has recently been summarized by Beckensall¹⁸: "The cists and barrows in this county contain beakers and food vessels, which gives the associated carvings an Early Bronze Age date. Burial mounds at Weetwood, Fowberry and Birtley have many carvings among the cairn material of round barrows, and the mound at Fowberry was built on outcrop rock that was covered with carvings."

Thus Roughting Linn, though itself not independently datable, is likely also to be of bronze age date. The meaning of the carvings is now lost "in the mists of time", and it seems unlikely that the symbolism of the various motifs can ever be decoded.

Acknowledgements

The original recording of the carvings was carried out in 1975 with the help of an Earthwatch expedition group organized by Mr. Evan Hadingham. Thanks are due to all who participated in the survey. The field drawings were reduced and collated in the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork with the help of Mr. Colm Hourihane. A final field check was made in 1987 with the aid of a grant from U.C.C.'s Arts Faculty Fund.

NOTES

¹ Beckensall, S. (1983). *Northumberland's Prehistoric Rock Carvings*. Pendulum Publications, Rothbury.

² Tate, G. (1865). *The Ancient British Sculptured Rocks of Northumberland and the Eastern Borders*. Hunter Blair, Alnwick.

³ Op. cit.

⁴ Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute at Newcastle upon Tyne, Aug. 24th to Sept. 1st 1852. Memoir read by Rev. William Greenwell, Warden of Neville Hall, Newcastle on Tues. Aug. 31. "On incised markings attributed to the Celtic period, noted upon rocks in the parishes of Ford and Eglingham in Northumberland", *Arch. Jour.* 9, 1852, 372.

⁵ Op. cit. note 2.

⁶ Beckensall, S. (1974). *The Prehistoric Carved*

Rocks of Northumberland. Frank Graham, Newcastle upon Tyne.

⁷ Op. cit. note 1.

⁸ van Hoek, M. (1982). *The Carved Rocks near Wooler*. Privately published, Oisterwijk.

⁹ Op. cit. note 1, map 2.

¹⁰ Op. cit. note 2, plate I.

¹¹ Haddingham, E. (1974). *Ancient Carvings in Britain: A Mystery*. Garnstone Press, London.

¹² Op. cit. note 1, p. 173.

¹³ Op. cit., p. 205.

¹⁴ Op. cit., fig. p. 207.

¹⁵ Op. cit., fig. p. 115.

¹⁶ Op. cit., fig. p. 161 upper.

¹⁷ Op. cit., fig. p. 157 lower.

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 26.