

Prehistoric decorated stones: mobiliary examples

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Recent publications have discussed important evidence relating to the chronology of cup-and-ring marks (Burgess 1990a and 1990b). Central to the dating of these rock motifs are examples found on pebbles, cobbles and boulders. Accepting Burgess' arguments in substance, this paper suggests that mobiliary decorated stones have potential for a broader research programme. As an initial step, it is propounded that these mobiliary stones should not be regarded as a single phenomenon, and a basis for their categorisation is proposed.

Prehistoric decorated stones, with motifs of the type known in Northumberland as cup-and-ring marks, fall into three broad categories:

1. Outcrop examples: amongst the best known are those at Chattonpark Law, Roughing Linn and Weetwood Moor.
2. Earthfast examples: which would include motifs worked on standing stones such as the one at Matfen.
3. Mobiliary examples, sometimes known as *portables*, i.e. as opposed to being fixed, it is possible to move them.

These three categories present a somewhat oversimplified situation. In particular, critical examination of motif-bearing stones in the *mobiliary* group indicates that a tighter definition is required. Within the *mobiliary* category it is possible to suggest three sub-divisions.

(A) DECORATED PEBBLES, COBBLES AND BOULDERS¹

All motif-bearing stones within this sub-group are naturally formed and are neither outcrops nor earthfast. Several members of this sub-group may be regarded as true *portables*, a word which is often used as an alternative description for the whole of the *mobiliary* group. However, many motif-bearing stones are not portable in the accepted sense of the word for, while they are movable, it is not always possible to pick them up and carry them. True portables (such as two cupped pebbles in the Berthele Collection) might have been designed for convenient manual movement, although there is no evidence that this was ever the original intention. Indeed, some mobiliary stones are so large that, like the example at Weetwood Cairn, they are virtually earthfast (Beckensall, 1983, 27, 119-122). Symbols worked into cobbles and boulders could have been part of a larger structure, a composite design consisting of a number of single cell motifs. At the smaller end

of the range, cupped pebbles might well have served as talismans.

It is unfortunate that *portable mobiliaries* are frequently found in isolation, out of context, having been scattered by human activity throughout the millennia. However, symbols worked into stones of this sub-group are usually unbroken and demonstrate a single design uncomplicated by later additions. Specimens from Lickar Moor (H00413a), Weetwood Moor (H00503a), and from Weetwood Cairn and Fowberry Cairn, Chatton (Beckensall, 1983, 120, 133) have cup-and-ring motifs which are clearly analogous with some of the complex forms which can be found on rock outcrops. However, it is more common to find that stones in this sub-group have only simple cups (e.g. H00452a, Horton Moor, and H00529d Lilburn, as illustrated). Occasionally, examples can be found with symbols on two sides, as is the case with H00561b from Hepburn Moor (find spot: F.M. Berthele, pers. comm.)².

(B) DECORATED STONES FRAGMENTED FROM LARGER BOULDERS OR OUTCROPS

Some stones of this type may be regarded as false *mobiliaries* for it might be difficult to determine whether they were struck from larger boulders or from outcrop rock. Members of this sub-group can be identified most easily when the motif has been damaged or interrupted by the deliberate or accidental breaking of the stone at a point in time after the design had been completed. Stone H00452b (Horton Moor), with a break across its single cup, is a case in point. Regrettably, it has no archaeological context.

Allowance has to be made for damage which has been inflicted in the recent past and quarrying has probably accounted for a substantial number of incomplete motifs. Nevertheless, examples of interrupted motifs have been found to accompany cremations and single-grave interments of the Bronze Age. This has made it possible to argue that the occurrence of broken decorated stones in association with funerary deposits is significant. In

fact this is misleading, since this was their secondary location: they had been removed from another place, perhaps not always with the greatest of care. It therefore follows that these broken cup-and-ring rocks were earlier in origin than the Bronze Age cairns in which some examples have been found (Burgess, 1990a and 1990b; Simpson and Thawley, 1972).

(C) SHAPED STONES

Members of this sub-group demonstrate characteristics which extend beyond the design elements of motifs alone. They can be identified as motif-bearing stones, the shape of which has been artificially determined in a regular and meaningful way. This would not include stones of random shape or purely natural forms. In a number of cases, the stones in this sub-group are triangular in appearance, such as H00561c (unpublished) and H00563a (Beckensall, 1983, 43, 169) both found out of context in the Hepburn area and now on display at Chillingham Castle.

H00561c is virtually an isosceles: the two longer sides being relatively smooth and well-formed while the short base side shows signs of having been more crudely broken away. H00563a has two long, slightly curved sides, one certainly natural while the other is probably artificially enhanced. The short third side is straight and smooth – nowhere is a jagged break visible. It is tempting to regard these examples as misplaced standing stones, but in the absence of a firm context for either stone this would be mere conjecture.

Other *mobilieries* which might fall into this sub-group have been recovered from Ord (H00400b), Alnwick Fords (H00659a), Doddington (Beckensall, 1983, 40) and Cartington (Beckensall, 1983, 198). A more certain example was discovered in 1885 in a multiple cremation site at Lilburn Farm (Moffat, 1885, 220–222). Moffat describes it as:

a thick massive stone, shaped like the apex of a pyramid, and carved on each side except one, which had suffered some partial demolition at some previous period.

However, Moffat's report is replete with ambiguities and in the full text it is not clear whether the stone had been damaged prior to its discovery by farm hands. It is therefore open to doubt whether this stone was found in its primary context, although the style of the motifs and the nature of the deposits suggest a pre-Bronze Age date³.

CONCLUSIONS

Examples from Northumberland suggest that *mobilier* decorated stones cannot be placed in one amorphous group. In fact, it is likely that they served a number of disparate functions. Some natural forms are indeed *portable* and might have been so intended, although they could equally have

been single units of a larger design or, perhaps, items for funerary deposition. Broken stones present a double puzzle. The original purpose of the motifs becomes confused with speculations as to why some of them were deliberately broken during prehistory. Shaped *mobilieries* are demanding of more attention than they have enjoyed hitherto, and a more detailed study is being undertaken as part of a larger research programme⁴.

It is disappointing that so many *mobilier* decorated stones have been found without a firm primary context. By their very nature they are likely to be the only motifs that will ever occur in a meaningful context. Whilst we marvel at the brilliant complexity of cup-and-ring forms at Roughting Linn, Chattopark Law and Weetwood, it is the *mobilier* stones which may turn out to have more to say⁵.

NOTES

1. For guidance, the geological definitions are as follows (Whitten and Brooks, 1972, 88, 341):
pebble diameter range 4–64mm
cobble diameter range 64–256mm
boulder diameter range 256mm plus.
2. All numbers prefixed by the letter H are the writer's own database reference for the stone.
3. For a full discussion of this important site see Burgess 1990a and 1990b.
4. By the writer as a research thesis at Bournemouth University.
5. But see Bradley, 1991, for an alternative view.

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Stone H00529d belongs to Neil Mathers of Haugh Head Farm, Wooler, and I am grateful to him for agreeing to place it at the Burrell Museum on loan.

References

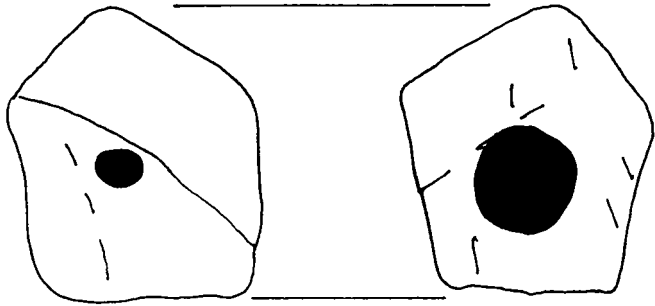
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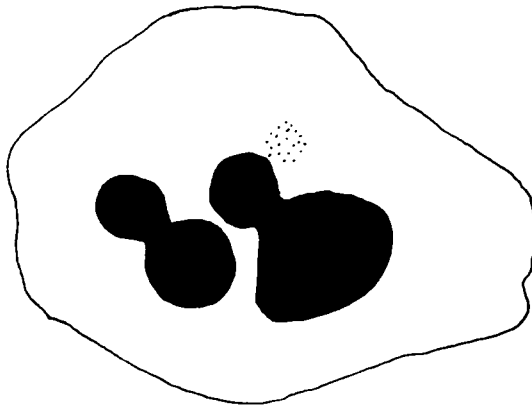
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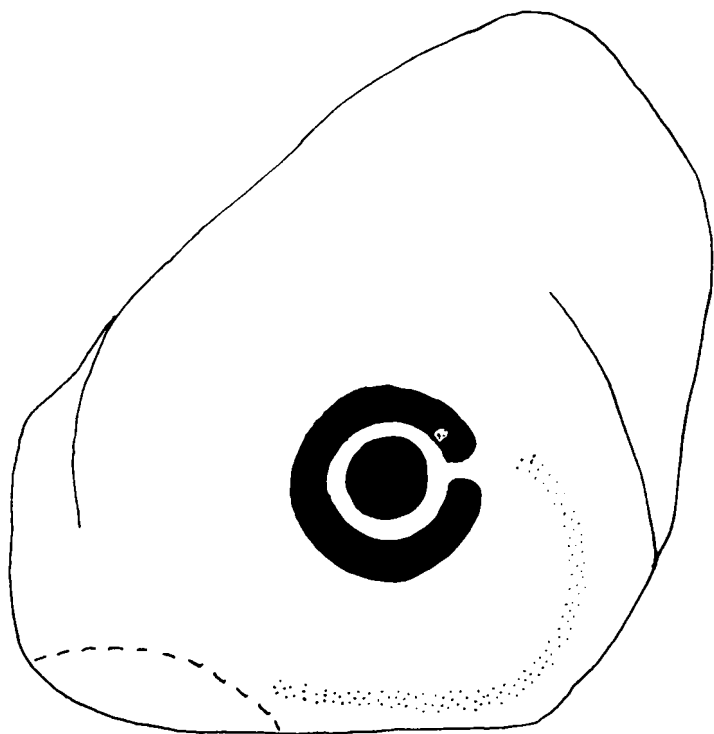


H00561b
Hepburn area

54



H00529d
NU 01952608

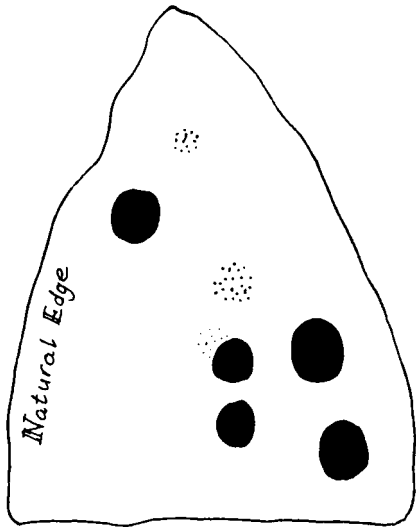


H00413
NT 957418

100mm

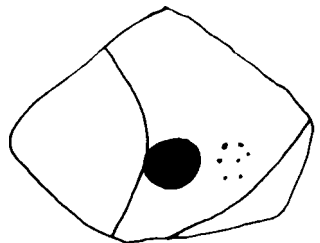


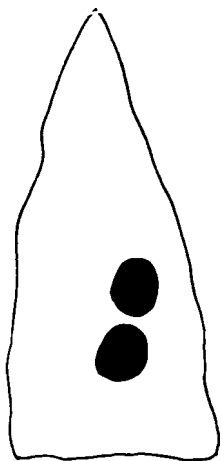
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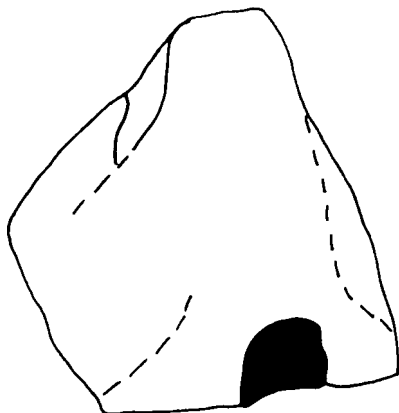
H00563a
NU 080250

H00452a
NU 01633288



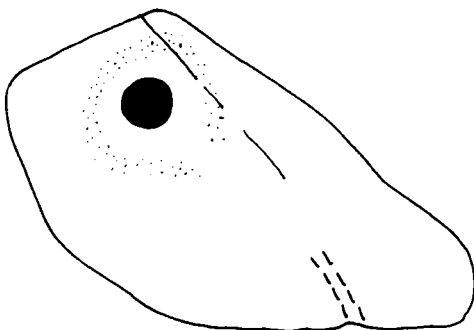


H00561c
NU 06882467



H00452b
NU 016316

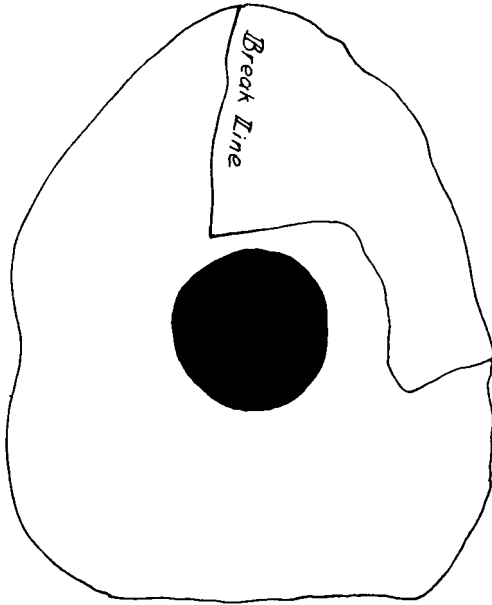
H00503a
NU 02152814



100mm




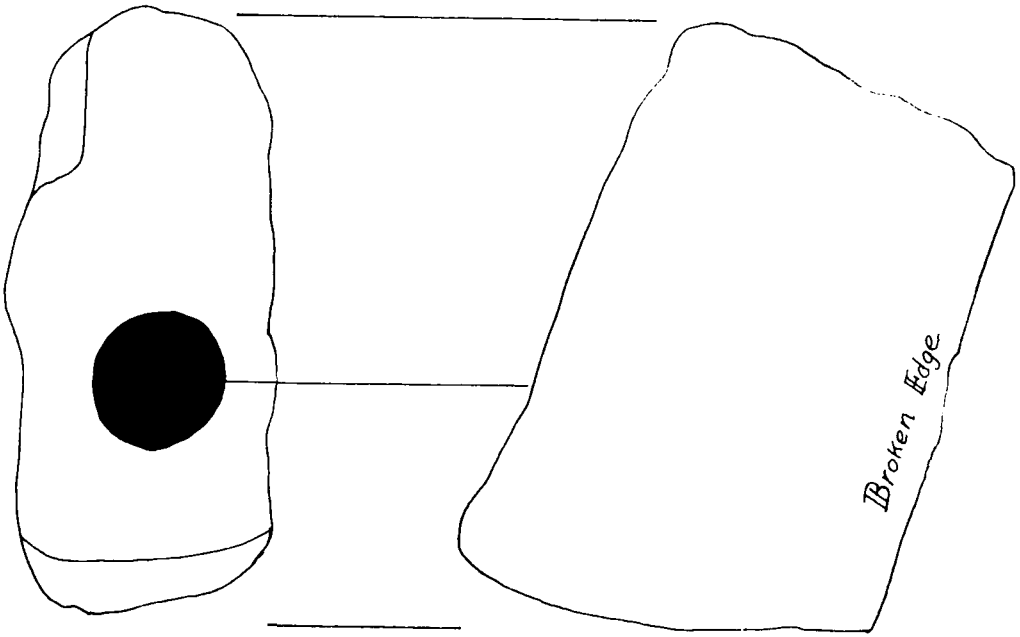
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H00659a
NU 13700383

100mm





H00400b
NT 965503