

Book Reviews

Stan Beckensall

Hexham: History Beneath Our Feet

Stan Beckensall, Hexham, Northumberland, 1991.

This small book (40 pages) is an uncomfortable combination of a popular local history and excavation report with a digression about burial rites. The local history part of the text is made difficult to follow in parts by the addition of personal commentary and speculation which break up the narrative: 'Wilfred was a man of considerable influence and power, and like so many powerful people, he could get people's backs up'. One would not presume to criticise the facts and opinions, only their place in this publication.

The archaeological narrative combines, consequently confusing the reader, a factual account of the excavation with the conclusions that have been drawn from it and, again, personal comments and digressions. At the beginning of this section Mr Beckensall sets out his archaeological credentials for being involved in the excavation but then goes on, for instance, to refer naively to pottery as 'Victorian' (a meaningless term archaeologically) and to include the entries in his 'Field note book' relating to the discovery of human remains. To date the cobbled market place to the late nineteenth century on the basis of 'a piece of Victorian pottery ... found below it' is questionable. Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901, but what sort of pottery was it? As for the

note book - 'I decided that it was not necessary to call in the Coroner, ... I informed the Abbey Rector, and we agreed that the bones should ultimately be re-buried'. Re-interment is a standard condition of the Burial Licence which should have been obtained from the Home Office for the excavation and removal of any human remains.

In the end the combination of local history and archaeology is not a success and the booklet suffers from a confusion about who will actually read it. Laborious explanations of archaeological techniques and terminology pitched at the layman are followed by a level of detail about actual layers and their excavation, and the skeletal remains, more appropriate to a site archive report.

The general appearance of the publication is unattractive, with a crowded text (blanked out in one or two places) and poorly prepared and laid out illustrations. This is unfortunate, as it does little credit to Mr Beckensall's intention, clear throughout the text, of completing the project in a professional manner. He must, however, be congratulated on getting his results into print so quickly: a practice which professional archaeologists might well emulate.

J. Vaughan
J. Nolan

Stan Beckensall

Prehistoric Rock Motifs of Northumberland. Volume 1 - Ford to Old Bewick, 1991.

Prehistoric Rock Motifs of Northumberland. Volume 2 - Beanley to the Tyne, 1992.

Cumbrian Prehistoric Rock Art, 1992.

Stan Beckensall, Hexham, Northumberland.

Although these three slim paperbacks are in an (effectively) identical format, the Cumbrian example differs somewhat in its aims and content from the two Northumberland books. Stan Beckensall has written much about Northumberland's cup-and-ring rocks before, so that these two new offerings require minimal explanation and background. They are essentially field guides, and as Beckensall says in

Northumberland 1, 'I have chosen to let the drawings speak for themselves'.

The Cumbrian book is rather different in scope and intention, as one might deduce from its subtitle: 'Symbols, monuments and landscape'. The Cumbrian material is not only much sparser, but has received much less attention in the past, so that this volume has much more general text, far fewer sites to describe, and is thus less of a field guide.

To bring it up to a publishable size it has been padded out with a section on *Our debt to the antiquarians*, illustrations of sites with no rock art, and of Early Bronze Age pottery emanating from sites with rock art. Inclusion of the latter without careful accompanying captions, this reviewer particularly deplores, because the uncritical reader will assume these vessels have something to do with inscribed rocks. Beckensall even says insidiously of some pictures of Early Bronze Age accessory cups (he uses the outmoded term 'incense cups', and not even the more recent and less loaded 'pygmy cups'): 'The patterns of circles, dots and chevrons are echoed in some rock motifs'. Well, some of the china in my kitchen also has these patterns 'echoing' rock motifs, and that has just about as much relevance to prehistoric rock art as do the Early Bronze Age vessels Beckensall illustrates. What he does not emphasize is that the sites in question are known from old, inadequate excavations; yet even the sketchy records which survive make it clear that these were multi-period sites. The relationship of inscribed rocks and Early Bronze Age pots within these sites is unknown: they have no better technical claim to be related to the marked rocks than the 'willow pattern' in the surrounding plough soil.

At this point this reviewer must declare his strong chronological interest in this rock art: that it is Neolithic and Chalcolithic, and was only incidentally re-used (for example as building material) in the Early Bronze Age. It is interesting to note that Professor Bradley's *Foreword* to the Cumbrian volume hints at a similar conclusion: the rock carvings are lumped into the same category as stone axe quarries, henges and stone circles, which are all Neolithic-Chalcolithic. In the Cumbrian book Beckensall is reticent about chronology, except by implication (e.g. illustrations of Bronze Age pots). In *Northumberland 1* (p.2) they are 'late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age', but in *Northumberland 2* (p.4) he seems still to prefer a Bronze Age date, while accepting Neolithic beginnings.

Before leaving the Cumbrian volume Stan Beckensall must be taken to task for one astonishing passage in his *Introduction* (p.4). In attacking writers on stone circles, he condescendingly acknowledges that while 'there are good books', they are short on 'detailed explanation'. This, he states, results from the lack of modern excavation. To make up for shortage of explanation, he goes on, 'the few known facts are shuffled around in a pack and dealt so that you get a different hand, and some people seem to make it up when there aren't any facts'.

One could be excused for wondering whether Mr Beckensall really understands what archaeology is all about. Not only do these lines insult some very good writers and very good books, but they are a complete misrepresentation of what they contain. Does he really believe that facts and explanation are the same thing? It is a truism in archaeology that facts abound and explanations are ephemeral and contentious, because they derive from inferences based on those facts. Far from being short on facts, the stone circle books he complains of are stuffed full of facts. They are

lacking in explanations because of the limitations of archaeological evidence. No amount of top quality excavation will necessarily provide explanations. There have been many excellent modern stone circle excavations, and if they leave us not knowing what these sites were for and how they were used, it is not the fault of the excavators, but of the limitations of the evidence and methodology. Like witnesses to a crime, several archaeologists may be presented with the same body of facts and draw wildly differing conclusions from them. No, Mr Beckensall, when it comes to talk of shuffling facts and making things up, it is very dangerous to start casting stones – especially, when, in the next paragraph, you admit that your book may after all only 're-shuffle the information pack'. It is not a question of 'what right' you have to investigate these matters (p.4), because everyone has the right; it is a question of 'what qualifications' you feel you have for your task.

On the practical side, any reviewer would have to complain next about the vagaries of the scales used in these volumes, especially the two Northumberland publications. For the stones themselves, scales are often hard to see, and when they are located, more often than not are unlabelled. One thus has little idea about the size of the individual rocks. There is little help to be had from the photographs, which only exceptionally have a scale (and then usually an illegible one). The maps fare little better. Many have no scale at all, and this is particularly unhelpful when the maps involved are supposed to be aids to locating sites. This raises the question of how 'user-friendly' these books are, and here they leave much to be desired. A straw poll of colleagues who have tried to locate sites using these books confirms my impression that, scales apart, they often lead to a lot of fruitless tramping about with no reward at the end.

This is all such a pity, because Stan Beckensall has carried out such a vast amount of single-minded, diligent, valuable research on these markings over the years, that to publish the results in this way does seem like spoiling what potentially is an important barrel for an 'aporth of black ink in the right place'.

But enough of criticism. These books do have their value. As field guides, though flawed, all students of the subject should have them. As corpora they are as complete as anyone could make them, bearing in mind that new rocks are being discovered all the time. I have never liked Stan Beckensall's illustrations. They give little feeling for the character of the scribings, and, paradoxically, could be considerably improved by a more sparse (but imaginative) use of stippling, as the cover illustrations on all three works (inside and out) make clear. The strictures against emphasizing markings by measures such as chalking, are to be applauded.

I have been critical, but let no-one doubt: the hunting out and recording of rock art is an aspect of archaeology ideally suited to the 'part-time archaeologist', as Richard Bradley puts it in his foreword to the Cumbrian book. Much of the work on rock art in recent decades has been done by part-time archaeologists as Richard Bradley

acknowledges, and as Stan Beckensall himself emphasizes in his dedication of *Northumberland 2* to R.W.B. Morris. If I may paraphrase Bradley's concluding remarks in his *Cumbrian* foreword, Stan Beckensall's labour of love continues a great tradition. His indefatigable researches have

stretched over decades and resulted in a string of publications long enough to put many professionals to shame. All those interested in the landscape and prehistoric past of the North should possess these books. At less than £10 for the three they could hardly be described as expensive!

Colin Burgess