

## Symbols on Stone: the State of the Art

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*This paper deals mainly with the areas that the author has studied in depth: areas of Northumberland, Cumbria, County Durham and the North Yorkshire Dales.*

De-personalization, sanitization, categorization, taking the very life-blood out of the past and reducing it to dry bones and labelled artefacts often endangers the enjoyment of archaeology. We are constantly reminded that archaeology is about people, but we sometimes forget it. Fortunately, it is difficult to take away the excitement of discovering, visiting, or re-visiting rock art sites, and few people do not respond to the symbols on stones, whether they are picked out on earthfast or outcrop rock commanding great stretches of landscape, or on monuments. To see for the first time the variety of symbols on Long Meg, when the sun moves into just the right place to reveal them in detail, or to look north from Gayles Moor over Teesdale and as far as the North Sea is exciting. Place has its own power, but rock art adds to the pleasure by facing us with thoughts about people that take us into the origin of, and need for symbolism. Symbolism abstracts what is essential; in poetry, it condenses, refines, and generates power, and presents layers of meaning to which we respond according to our experience and sensitivity. Symbolism is necessary because it accepts that nothing that is important in life is simple, even though it may pare away inessentials.

In rock art, the starting point for me was curiosity about the motifs, and a sense of awe about some of the places where they lie. Old Bewick was that starting point in England. Outside, it had been the megalithic sites of Malta. Added knowledge has not brought any dramatic solutions to the problems of origins, purpose and use of the symbols, but that doesn't worry me any more.

My discovering and recording rock art have been two essential tasks. Without data there is nothing to think with or about. Yet despite a multiplicity of new site discoveries, it is still difficult to answer some of the questions that we raise.

The examination of large numbers of motifs shows us how they were made. Assuming that there were no metal tools, chisels/picks of hard stone were used with their points chipped down to allow delicate picking or heavier removal of stone in cups and grooves. All stages

of motif-making, from tentative roughing out to deep excavation, are visible in oblique light.

The most likely way of using the tool was to impact it with a mallet, to get good control. Although the context of the find is not secure, a tool found at Dod Law (Smith, 1990) could have been used in this way, for it has a pick-like end and signs of battering on the heel. Newly-uncovered examples of rock art show clear pick-marks, and smoothed examples could be the result of exposure and erosion. An example is from North Plantation, Fowberry (Beckensall, 1991a), illustrated here (fig. 1; see also Bradley's photograph in this volume). The exposed surface of sandstone outcrop has eroded the cup and ring designs, but someone in prehistory removed a large part of this exposed rock and chipped out a cup, ring and groove at a lower level. The latter was covered over and preserved. This example also demonstrates that rock art probably extended over long periods, although we cannot say how long it would take for a 'fresh' motif to erode. It also asks the question: for what purpose was the removed piece of outcrop used? Eroded motifs occur in the contexts of monuments, such as on cists, but this transfer from one site to another does not necessarily mean that people were no longer producing new motifs (Simpson and Thawley 1972).

The choice of rock, its shape, evenness of surface, and faults determined the kind of design. In this sense, we are dealing with an 'art' form, for the makers were fully aware of the possibilities of their material. This applies to many cobbles and small boulders as well as to outcrop and earthfast rock.

The most common symbol is a cup, a world-wide phenomenon with a wide time-span. Grooves, straight or curvilinear, combine to produce motifs, which in turn may form panels of rock art.

The 'hidden art' of the Irish passage graves echoes the motifs on earthfast and outcrop rock in Britain generally, whereas the visible Boyne valley panels have a distinctive exuberance.

In northern Britain there are strong individual influences that combine common motifs to produce distinctive differences; for example, in the design of rosettes, in the incorporation of radial and diametric grooves, in the production of squares, rectangles, long channels and deep cups. With each new discovery, it is

amazing how many variations are made on simple themes. Regional variations will no doubt provide material for many theses.

What we read into them will continue to be a fascinating and uncertain speculation, and may say more about how we see the world than about the obscure intentions of those people who made them.

Currently, the most acceptable explanation for the distribution of motifs in the landscape is that they were put there by mobile people, mainly at viewpoints on prominent rocks and paths (Bradley *et al* 1993). R.J. Lampert (1993) attributes this distribution of motifs in Aboriginal Australia to a history that reflects people's dependence on the land: "While the extent of a territory was known, boundaries were less important than sacred sites, usually natural features in the landscape where the spirit ancestors had performed creative or other heroic deeds, the re-enactment of which ritual, by succeeding generations, maintained the relationship between people and land and ensured the replenishment of natural resources." This ritual element may well be responsible for the positioning of some rock art, and it is significant that many motifs mark viewpoints from which animals could be observed. This also assumes that vegetation at the time did not obscure such views in the positioning of rock art. We tend to separate practical and ritual/religious functions in our society, but this separation does not seem to apply to non-western communities.

How do we view the motifs themselves? There is a 'right' way to look at them, and this is the way we draw them. If the rock slopes, one stands at the foot of the rock slope and looks up the rock surface. However, the motifs can only be seen from close-up. Once at the rock itself,

one has to look outwards from the rock and take viewpoints from all directions.

Distribution maps of rock art can be misinterpreted. For example, dots on a map would appear to focus the viewpoints of many rocks on the Milfield Plain, but the Plain cannot be seen from many of them, and it can be argued that the focus of interest is elsewhere. Each rock has to be seen in a restricted regional context, and some of them are in places where there are, or have been, funerary monuments, mainly round cairns. It may be that round cairns of any period are built on viewpoints and sites that are already venerated. Thus it is not surprising to find round cairns on sites that have been already marked (Bradley and Mathews *in prep*). Even when we have done our surveys and plotted our viewpoints, there must be other factors now lost to us, which give a particular place its power or significance.

The Gayles Moor site (Beckensall and Laurie, forthcoming) is an area where the rock art is restricted to a shelf of land 320-330m high. To the south, the views are restricted by a ridge at 350m, but to the north is an unrestricted view across the Tees valley. This is typical marginal land: on the edge of a fertile valley, yet not the highest part of the landscape. There are some small cairns and a ring cairn, and an outstanding rounded hill on the downslope north that may be natural. Today, this thin soil can only be used for sheep grazing and military exercises. There are some complex designs and simple motifs mixed together, with the most elaborate clustering in the centre of the 3/4 mile stretch. There is nothing to corroborate any specific chronology in this area.

In Ireland, a recent investigation of rock art and its disposition in the Iveragh Peninsular, Co. Kerry

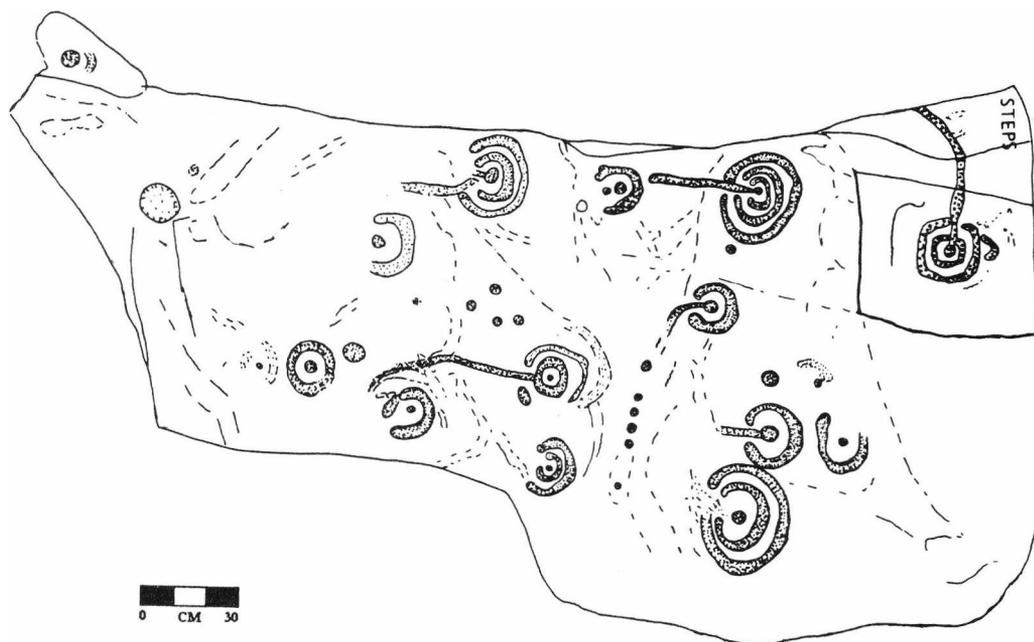
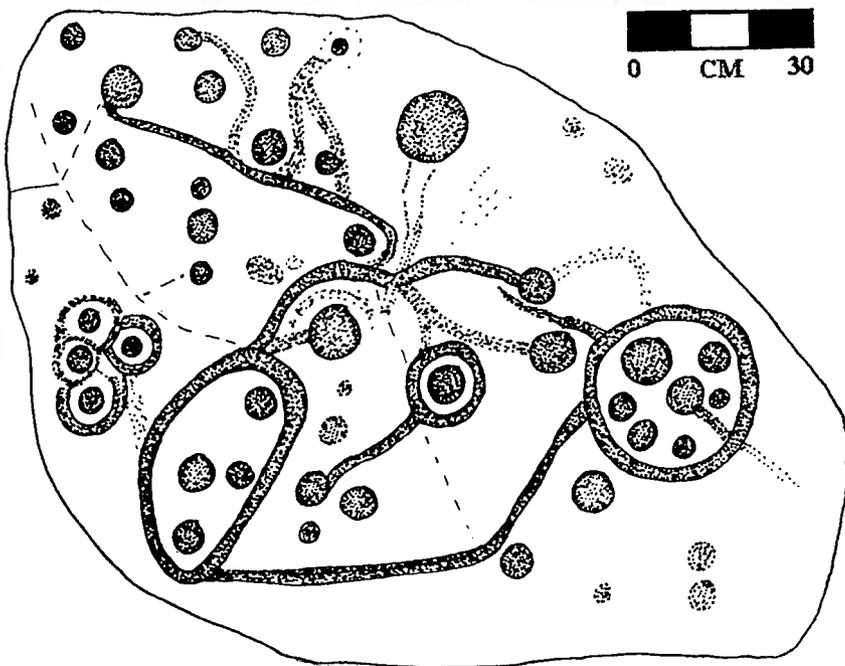
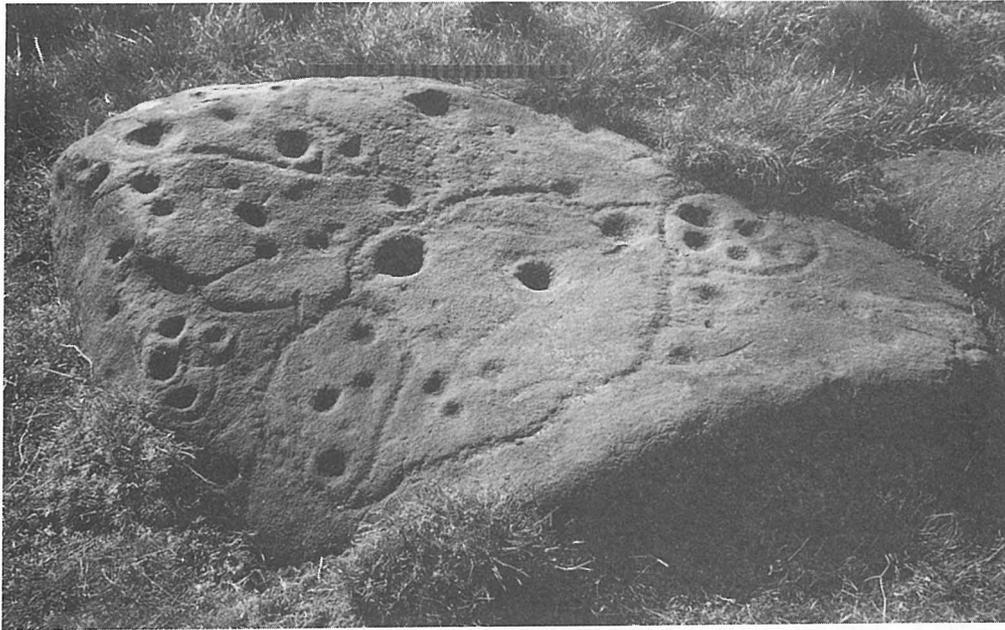


Fig. 1. Fowberry North Plantation. A piece of rock has been cut off the outcrop (top, right), and a freshly-pecked motif made at a lower level (see also plate 6 in Bradley, this volume).

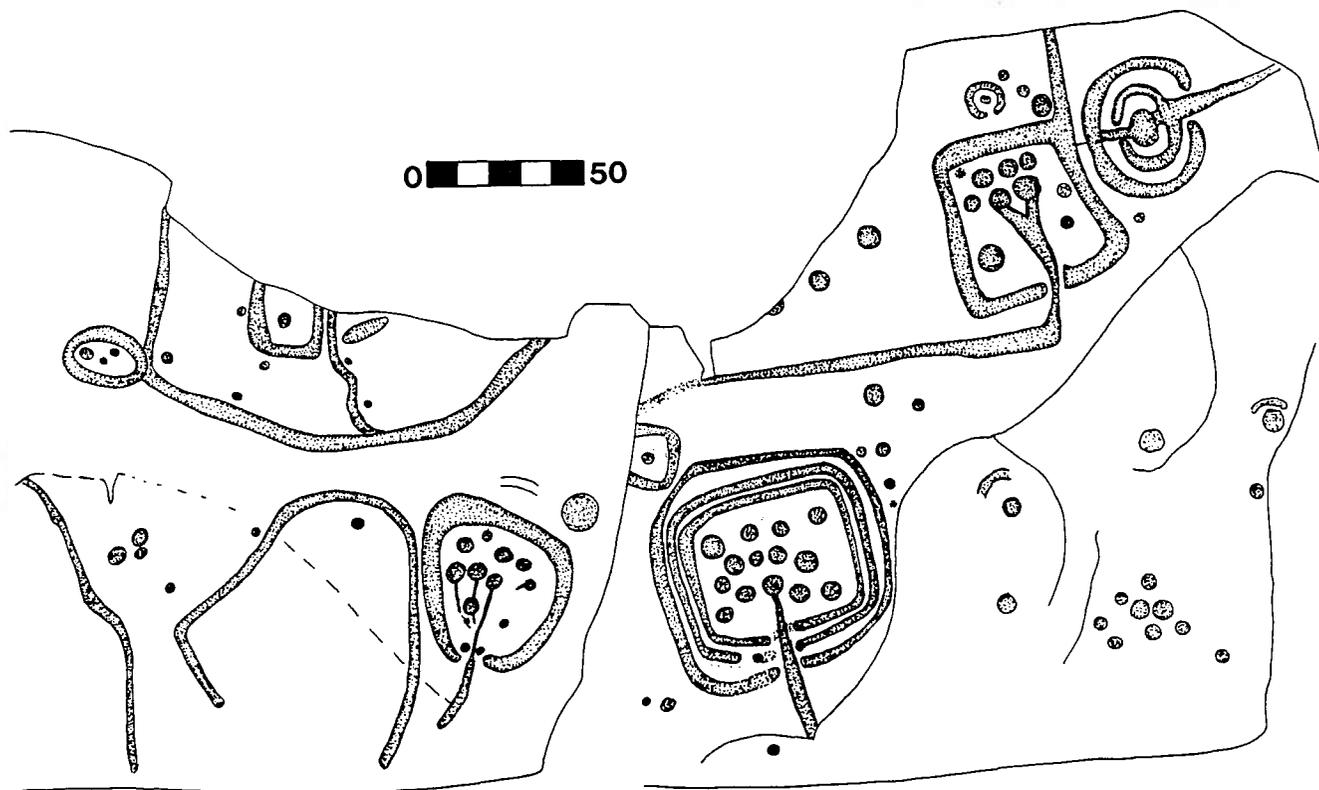


*Fig. 1. Gayles Moor. An earthfast boulder in marginal land overlooking the fertile Tees Valley. The most complex motifs are on rocks clustered together in this area.*

(O'Sullivan and Sheenan, 1993), throws more light on the way in which the majority of sites on the peninsular are viewpoints towards the heads of river valleys and the coast beyond. Rock art has always been known in Ireland outside passage graves, and there is increasing interest in it. Like Gayles Moor, the tendency is towards marginal locations, but it also draws attention to the fact that here 'The almost mutual exclusiveness of the area of densest concentration of rock art and other prehistoric monument types in South-west Ireland neither confirms nor denies

a broad contemporaneity or cultural relationship for these monuments.'

The world picture shows that over 70% of all rock art was produced by hunters and gatherers. This is interesting, because our Neolithic is pastoral and agricultural, but in the marginal areas where rock art predominates, we are dealing with people who must have used the thinner upland soils and the more wooded and fertile valleys as hunting areas. We do not have any rock art that depicts human occupations. The distribution of



*Fig. 3. Dod Law, Wooler. The existence of motifs on two levels of rock suggests that part of the earlier surface may have been removed and a fresh design added.*

rock art does not coincide with a concentration of settled habitation.

Apart from the rare northern rock shelters and Irish and Scots passage graves, British rock art is an open-air phenomenon.

The few motifs that appear on standing stones may have been made before the stones were erected, or the marked stone may have been transferred from another site (like the bluestones at Stonehenge). They form an interesting group, and raise questions about chronology.

We are in danger of finding only what we look for (Bradley 1994). A newly-discovered cup and ring on one of the standing stones on a ring cairn at Moor Divock (Beckensall 1992 and 1995) and a cup-marked cobble in its disturbed centre can be commented on in different ways:

1. Because Greenwell's excavation at the centre produced a food vessel, the ring of stones is contemporary with that, and so is the motif.
2. Greenwell's methods of excavation and recording were not accurate, so we may conclude nothing.
3. The motif was already on the stone before it was erected.
4. The motif was picked onto the stone after the cairn was built.
5. Only re-excavation of the site may provide an answer to sequencing.

There are what appears to be a number of insuperable problems. Long Meg is covered with many different kinds of symbols: linear grooves, spirals, concentric circles, etc (Beckensall, 1992; Frodsham, this volume). It appears to have been the focus of symbols and motifs right up to the modern initials. It's the odd stone out at the site; red sandstone among the porphyrite. But a great ditch that encircles the farm was revealed from the air and gives the northern part of the circle its flattened arc, and there are other buried features that may have incorporated the stone. We don't know.

When was Little Meg built? Here we have some boulders in a rough circle that may or may not have been protruding from a pile of cobbles that covered a cist, two stones of which have cups and rings, but broken off, worn. And on one of the tougher kerbstones is a series of concentric circles linked to a spiral.

In my account of the Old Parks mound, Cumbria (Beckensall, 1992a), I record the curious fronds or 'shepherds' crook' motifs on a stone row that appeared to divide this large mound. Similar motifs are found on the periphery of Irish megalithic areas and in Breton megalithic art (P. Frodsham pers. comm.), but there is nothing else like them in northern England. The mound remained sacred enough for multiple early bronze age cremations and pottery to be buried there, but the exposure and removal of the mound was such that we are left wondering what the relationship between the two episodes was.

The relationship between cairns and rock art is an intriguing one. There are considerably fewer Neolithic

burials under round mounds than those of a later period (Kinnes, 1979, figs. 4.1-4.3), and artefacts suggest that the form continued into the beaker period. As there are so few Neolithic burials in the area that we have studied, it could be that the rite was only practised for a small minority of people, unless digging has been in the wrong places or previous excavation has overlooked earlier Neolithic activity under later cairns. In Northumberland, the Broomhill cairn, which lies in an area of outcrop rock art, but has nothing in its structure to tie it to rock art, has deposits of cremated remains on the natural surface, and unburnt domestic debris that includes about 20 pots and flint chips. (Kinnes and Longworth, 1985). Jobey's excavated small Neolithic cairn at Chatton Sandyford is a mound with no burial deposit, like the one at Bamburgh, and its function is obscure (Jobey, 1968).

Of far more significance in the relationship between round cairns and rock art at the Fowberry mound. Burgess has described this as 'a structureless heap' with 'an arc of rough stone kerbing' to keep clearance stones in.' He is looking for ways to support his main point, that the presence of structures later than the Neolithic can be explained as 're-use of building material by people who had no notion of, or regard for, the original significance of the engravings' (Burgess, 1990).

The Fowberry site has been disturbed in part by quarrying, but there is sufficient of the mound *in situ* to show that it is a double-kerbed circular mound, with carefully packed small stones between the two kerbed circles. Granite boulders form part of the material chosen for the kerb (in a sandstone area), and three of the sandstone kerbs are cup-marked. Twenty specially-marked cobbles, all freshly pecked, with a large repertoire of motifs, came from the mound and its disturbed periphery. This is not a burial cairn, as far as we know. It lies on outcrop rock with no sign of a grave. There is no way in which these cobbles happened to be lying around waiting for future builders to clear them up either at Fowberry or Weetwood, where there were over 38.

So what is the significance of Fowberry mound? It is built on outcrop that is covered with motifs ranging from cups to more complex multiple rings and even a rectangle. Only one part of the cairn kerb overlies the actual markings. The outcrop with its carefully-constructed cairn dominates the downsweep of land that gives views as far as Ros Castle and Old Bewick. The types of motifs on outcrop and mound are similar to other numerous and well-executed motifs in the same area. The mound accentuates the importance of the chosen viewpoint. It is unlikely that the mound was built on top of the outcrop very long after the outcrop was marked, because the outcrop motifs are not eroded. The cobbles were incorporated into the mound soon after they were marked, and have been completely protected from erosion. The motifs on the outcrop and cobbles are in the same tradition. The boulder within the kerb of the Weetwood mound has the same radial design as that on nearby outcrop.

Although there are few round barrows in Northumberland that have been proved Neolithic, it is

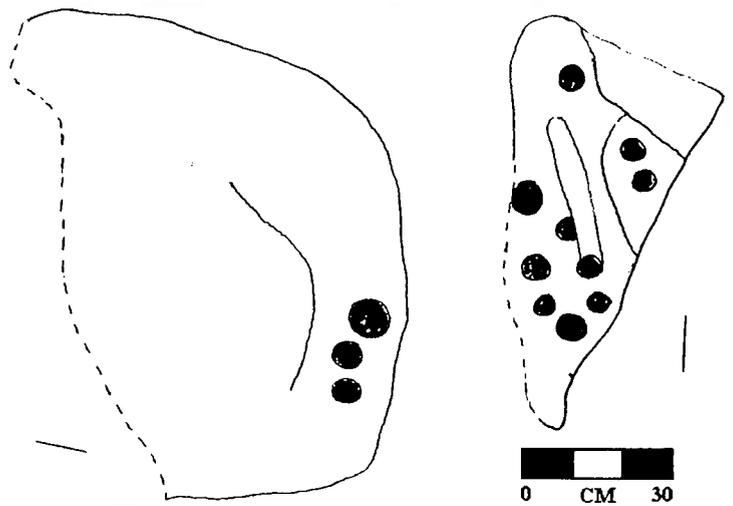
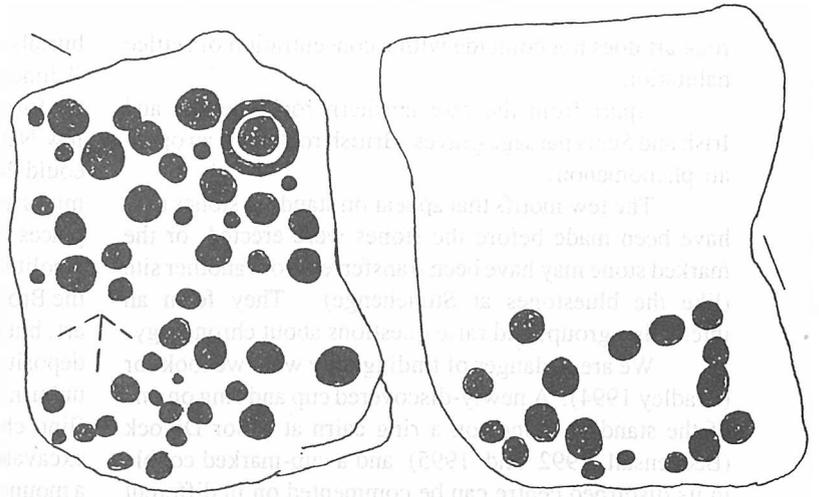


Fig. 4. Addlebrough, Wensleydale. A cairn with prominent sandstone blocks on a limestone plateau. Four of the sandstone blocks are marked (one has the addition of a bench mark).

possible that both Fowberry and Weetwood are, in the absence of any dateable material. They are ritual monuments in a broad ritual landscape, and certainly not casual field-clearance (Beckensall, 1983 and 1991).

Loose cobbles and other marked rocks, often in the form of boulders and flat stones, find their way into field clearance heaps, walls and buildings. The Fowberry, Weetwood, Pitland Hills, and other sites point to a cairn source for some of these displaced stones, for each of these mounds has retained many of its marked cobbles. More recently, discoveries of damaged cairns above outcrop rock on Hunterheugh, South Beanley (Beckensall, 1995) at a site that has viewpoints dominating a wide, extensive valley, may lead us to assume that more such sites may be found, and that some cairns already badly dug may hide further information. The Ouston cairn stone (Beckensall 1983, 1992a) was found in a cairn, and the design of linked cups is not only fresh, but fits its slab, so this could well have been specifically designed as a capstone. Others such as the uneroded Hazelrigg slab (Beckensall 1983, 1991) may also have a cairn source. However, it is the cobbles that are more numerous, and when they are found it is not easy to account for them other than as deliberately chosen and marked stones for insertion in cairns, especially where the cobbles have markings on two sides. At Old Deanham (Beckensall, 1992a), for example, six cobbles were found in field walls that are of medieval date, in an area of wide rig and furrow and an abandoned village. Four of these cobbles are marked on two sides, and some of the designs are quite complex for such small stones.

In north Northumberland alone (Beckensall 1991) over 100 'loose' marked stones have been recorded, almost all by the author, and more continue to be found (Hewitt, 1993; Beckensall, 1995). A continued study of such portables/mobiliaries may eventually give us an idea of a different function of the motifs from the outcrop and earthfast examples.

Blaise Vyner's excavation of the 'Wossit' at Street Houses (Vyner, 1988) casts some light on the use of cobbles with motifs in a context later than Neolithic. The Neolithic site, with its palisaded trenches and central pit, was backfilled with sandstone rubble, including cup-marked stones, found only in the upper deposits. In this layer were two cremations in collared urns. He concludes that the enclosure site was Neolithic, during which time activity was short-lived, but after that, activity continued until the Middle Bronze Age. He notes that cup-marked stones were absent from the slumped levels of the Neolithic cairn at Street House. His conclusions are: 'The deposition of rubble over the lines of the back-filled trenches and the central pit, together with the incorporated cup-marked stones and two cremations in collared urns, can be seen as an event separated by some centuries from the main use of the main site'.

At Barningham Moor (Beckensall and Laurie, forthcoming), the only marked rocks yet found other than on earthfasts are on three cairns, which are built on high ground overlooking the moor. In all, there are six marked stones.

Another interesting rock art association is with rock shelters in Northumberland. Goatscrag (Burgess, 1972), Corby Crag (Beckensall, 1976), and Ketley Crag, (Beckensall, 1991; Sellers and Maddison, 1991) all have motifs and extensive views across the landscape. Their prominence is monumental to begin with. Whereas Ketley Crag has no other associations, apart from being in an area rich in other outstanding rock art on Chatton Park Hill, Corby Crag had a cremation in an enlarged food vessel, with a groove on the rock floor leading to it, and a basin, ring and groove on the top of the overhang. Undiscovered at the time of the excavation of the floors of the Goatscrag rock shelter, where there were prehistoric burials, there are cups joined by curved grooves on top of the rock overhang (Beckensall, 1991). These sites had been marked off as significant in their position in the landscape. The Ketley Crag rock floor is covered with a complex design, but we do not know whether there was anything else in the rock shelter.

The question of how rock art of the cup and ring or spiral type originated will remain an intriguing one, and the universality of the symbolism has led many to believe that there is something locked in the human psyche that shares the imagery instinctively. Research in South Africa among the bushmen points to an entoptic imagery brought on by a state of trance, the symbols being the shaman's response to experiences in the spirit world (Dowson, 1992). How to explain the similarity of rock art in places as far apart as the Sahara, California, and Galicia without any evidence of physical contact and exchange of ideas, or why young children also produce the same symbols in their free art takes us beyond the usual tools of archaeology, but we have to struggle with the fact that these symbols occupy such important places in major monuments such as passage graves. We must also accept the possibility of such symbols having a wider application than in stone structures: as tattoos, or on cloth, for example.

The work of recording rock art in Britain has progressed considerably of late, thanks to the early initiative of people like Ronald Morris. The often well funded and well-motivated progress in some parts of the world has provided plenty of material for comparative study. A total of 150 major areas of rock art (ie. where there are over 10,000 figures in a zone of less than 1,000sq. km.) have been identified, representing over 40,000 years of history. A large percentage of these areas are desert or semi-desert, peripheral and isolated today. Major European rock art faces the Atlantic in wilderness areas.

Where does British rock art fit into a world pattern? The most striking feature is that British rock art is almost entirely abstract. The kind of superimpositions found at Valcamonica (Anati, 1993), with a range of pictograms, ideograms and psychograms, have enabled researchers to work out a sequence, which we cannot do with ours.

We take from the Irish sites our evidence for a Neolithic date, but it is a sobering thought that if we were to look only at Northumberland, Cumbria, County Durham

and North Yorkshire, there would be no firm evidence for a Neolithic date. Perhaps one of the most hopeful sites for such a date would be that of a cremation pit with a slab with spirals and cups and rings at Lilburn Hill Farm (Moffat, 1885). Its two layers of cremations in small pits and the possibility of the whole pit being covered with a mound makes the re-location of this site important, in case there is further evidence there of its nature, purpose and date.

Although we can see similarities in some of the symbols used in Britain with those elsewhere, it is dangerous to try to give them the same meanings. For all his fine work internationally, Professor Anati said this of the rock 'engraving' at Derrynablaha, County Kerry (Anati, 1993): "The anthropomorphic face is above the ideogram of circle-and-dot which are likely to symbolise 'fertility'. Below the ideograms a male sexual organ is depicted. Further below there is a line, probably representing the standard pole of the spirit. Around the being there are several ideograms meaning 'intercourse' or 'penetration'". Whereas I can see where he gets his ideas, there is no evidence that this is what the panel means. It emphasises how little we really know about the origin, use and meaning of British rock art symbolism. We all have a long way to go.

From the areas that I have intensively researched, the picture that emerges is of bands of people moving across a landscape made familiar to them by previous generations not only through stories and directions, but by markings on rocks that overlooked animal movements, that perhaps marked territories and paths, and whose symbolism encapsulated a shared belief in the relationship between them and the land. They knew how to grow crops, but the hunting of animals and husbandry were a vital part of their economy. Places where things happened, which folk memory was keen to perpetuate, could also be marked by symbols that appeared in tombs and other burial places, on some standing stones, and perhaps were tattooed on their bodies, or marked on wood, cloth and leather.

They cannot speak to us in the language we know, but they left enough of their systems of farming, hunting, and the beliefs expressed in the way they buried their dead or in their circles of stone, ditches and wood to give us a glimpse of what they had to face and something of what they believed. Their rock art is a vital part of that legacy.

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