

# The Carved Stone Ball from Hetton, Northumberland

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The purpose of this paper is to bring to wider attention the existence of two carved stone balls from the north of England. The only carved stone ball from Northumberland known to the authors was found in a field at Hetton North Farm, Lowick, Northumberland (NU 023363), by the farmer, Mr James Nesbit in 1973 whilst clearing stones from a ploughed field. The field in question had apparently been under the plough for only a few years and no other artefacts have been recovered from it, nor are there any signs of surviving ridge and furrow.

The ball falls neatly into Type 4a (6 knobs, not very prominent) of the classification of 387 balls undertaken by Marshall (1977), although it is slightly smaller than the average size. She lists 102 examples belonging to this group, only three of which come from England, including the two mentioned in this note: the remainder are from Scotland. It is formed from a dark grey granite and has six low discs defined by the faintest of carved lines, as opposed to knobs or facets and is almost exactly spherical, between 59 - 61mm diameter (fig. 1; plate 1). The six discs are cut in extremely low relief and are difficult to discern except under strong lighting conditions. The whole surface of the ball is pitted with pock marks in an irregular pattern, possibly caused either by a poor finishing technique or by abrasion in the ground. The ball also contains two opposed sunken conical depressions 56mm in diameter and 2.5mm deep. They appear to have been cut later than the discs, and do not suggest a functional use. The ball weighs 305 grams.

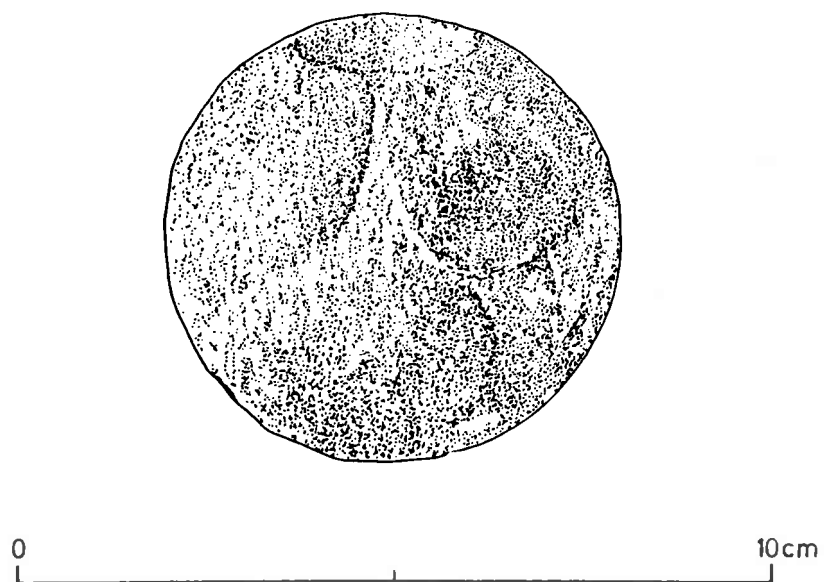
Subsequent to its discovery the ball underwent several adventures before coming to the attention of the authors. Mr William Bulmer of Stocksfield, Northumberland, and one-time Honorary Keeper for the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne compiled information on many balls and donated his index to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1936; it was presumably his material which was studied when Dorothy Marshall prepared her definitive paper on the subject and noted the ball in her catalogue (*op. cit.*, 66). In 1974 Mr Nesbit, who still retains possession of the ball, showed it to Mr and Mrs Rutherford of Wooler, both

keen antiquarians, who in turn submitted it to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland for identification and received a description from Dr. Joanna Close-Brooks, then Assistant Keeper.

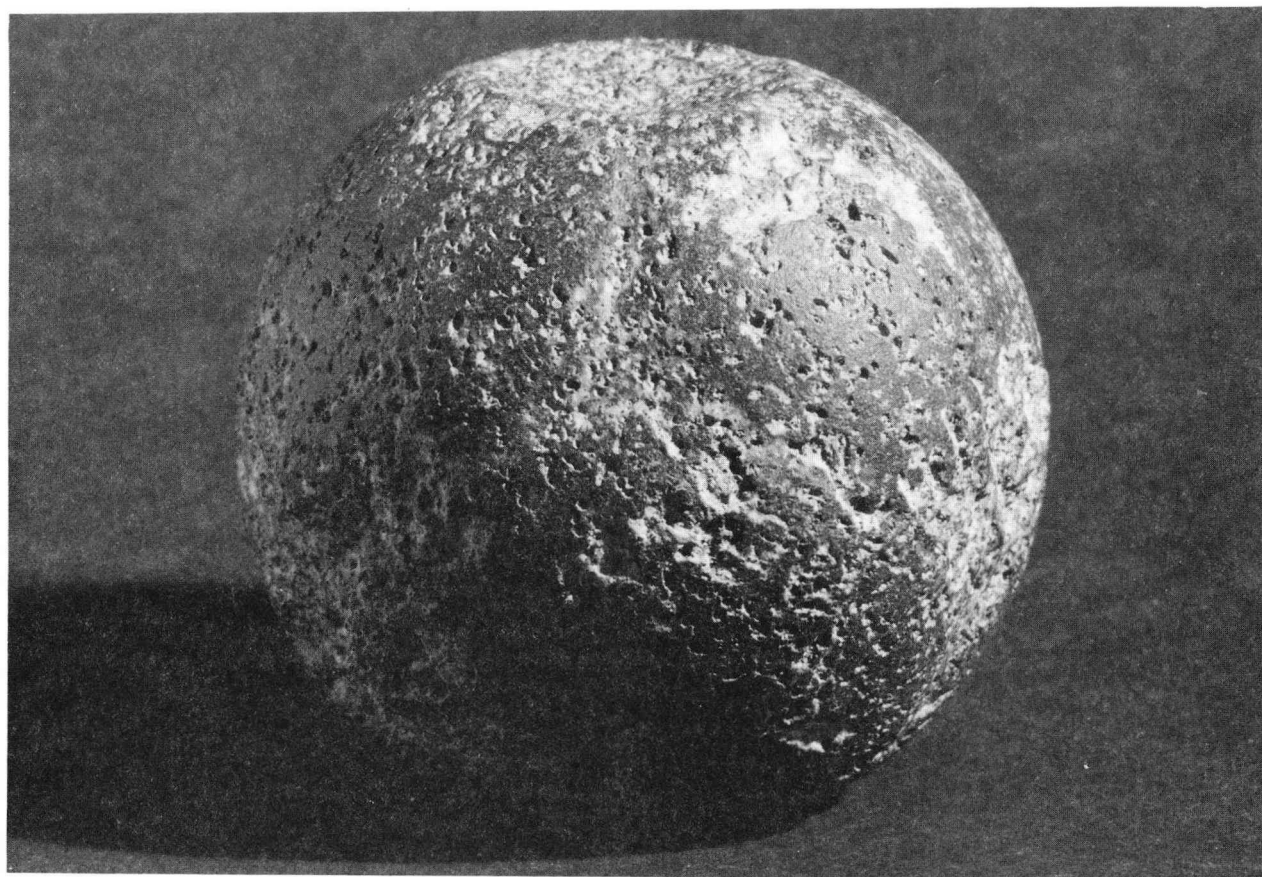
Another carved stone ball is on display in the Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle upon Tyne (accession number 1934.20). This example was recovered in about 1924 from Houghton-le-Side, Co. Durham, some 8km south of Bishop Auckland, and acquired by the museum in 1934. It was noted in Marshall's catalogue (*op. cit.*, 65), again under her class 4a although the knobs are more prominent than in the Hetton example. The ball is 70mm in diameter and was found '...3 feet below the surface...1 mile east of Dere Street. The surface of the ball is accurately carved into six circular bosses of equal size...' (Cowen, 1934). The circumstances of discovery, the finder and the precise findspot of the ball are all unknown and like the Hetton example it thus remains without context. It was exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries at their October 1934 meeting by Mr James McIntyre of Bishop Auckland, from whence it was donated to the Society.

There are a number of other potential candidates for carved balls from either north Northumberland or the north-east generally, but all suffer from being plain, of atypical size, unstratified or with no provenance. One is an ovoid example in the Fritz Berthele collection now lodged in Chillingham Castle, and three others are known to be in the possession of T. F. Murray of Hepburn. The Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle upon Tyne has a collection of plain balls, ascribed to either the Roman period (possible ballista balls) or to prehistory (possible pot-boilers: pers. comm. Lindsay Allason-Jones). Whilst there does exist a definite type of undecorated carved ball, for example from the decidedly funerary context within the Loughcrew chambered cairn cemetery (Conwell, 1866) these unprovenanced Northumbrian candidates cannot really be considered in the same light as the Hetton example.

Although neither of the carved balls which are the subject of this paper are outstanding pieces of workmanship



*Fig. 1. Drawing of the Hetton stone ball by S. Speak.*



*Plate 1. The Hetton stone ball  
(photography by L. Golding, Tyne and Wear Museums).*

neither can they be regarded as utilitarian objects. An awesome array of symbolic uses has been proposed for this class of artefact, some fanciful, others perhaps closer to the truth than we are currently able to realise. The difficulty of acquiring suitable raw material and incising complex designs such as that on the stone ball from Towie, Aberdeenshire, (Anon, 1862) upon an often intractable stone is perhaps a hint that these objects, or perhaps their individual or common owners, have an elevated or prestigious status within the community that produced them. However, at least a third of the known carved stone balls are worked on sandstones or similar soft material, rather than on hard igneous rocks.

Apart from their location, neither the Hetton nor the Houghton-le-Side ball shed any additional light upon our knowledge of carved stone balls, nor do they refute the generally accepted Neolithic date for this class of object. These northern examples and the type as a whole are likely to remain in the realm of mystery and form the subject of endless debate for some time to come. Indeed, for the title of his historical resumé of the history of interpretations of carved stone balls, Edmonds (1992) uses the comment of Piggott and Daniel (1951); 'their use is wholly unknown'. On the other hand, their use to archaeologists today is to remind us that in attempting to

place the Neolithic of northern England into a wider context we should be looking north to Scotland as well as south to Wiltshire and Wessex.

## References

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