

# Questions of Chronology: the Case for Bronze Age Rock Art in Northern England.

*Stan Beckensall and Paul Frodsham*

*(all illustrations by Stan Beckensall)*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper was originally written as a contribution to a proposed volume on the Bronze Age in Britain, for which we were asked to examine the evidence for the use of cup-and-ring type rock art in the Bronze Age of northern England with specific reference to the reuse of older decorated rocks in early Bronze Age funerary contexts. To do this, we give a general account of the state of rock art studies, and discuss a number of specific sites throughout Cumbria, Northumberland, Durham, Swaledale and Wensleydale before attempting to interpret the evidence.

There are two major contexts for prehistoric Rock Art in northern England: on rock outcrops within the natural landscape, and in or on artificially constructed monuments.

## Rock art in the landscape

Recent research has established that much rock art appears within the landscape in marginal areas which would have been of more vital use to pastoralists and hunters than to agriculturalists. It is almost always on sedimentary rocks, either outcrop or earthfast. Most is situated at viewpoints, overlooking fertile valleys. Although it can be at the highest point in the locality, it does not have to be in order to command wide views.

Few of the marked rocks can be seen from a distance, and people must have known where they were in order to view them. In some cases, such as the Brimham Rocks, Broomridge and Dod Law, there are prominent natural landscape features such as cliffs or dramatically eroded outcrops that create an unusual focal point. Even so, most motifs are on near-horizontal surfaces and would soon become obscured by vegetation unless managed on a regular basis. Many marked surfaces are less than a square metre in size. The motifs make

use of the shape of, and irregularities in the rocks, so that motifs and rocks blend sympathetically into the moorland landscape.

Many of the concentrations of such rocks lie in the same areas that earlier Mesolithic groups favoured for temporary camps, but flint and chert artefacts found in many such places apparently cover a wide time range, suggesting that some of these places retained significance through at least until the early Bronze Age. Such areas, with thin acidic soils, are in some cases marked by low-wall enclosures of uncertain date which must have been associated with stock management. Dating of rock art in such areas has so far proved impossible as there are no firm associations.

## Rock art on monuments

Rock Art occurs in or on a variety of Neolithic and/or early Bronze Age monuments throughout northern England. It is interesting to note that almost all of Cumbria's rock art is on monuments, with very little in the open air locations so characteristic of Northumberland.

### In, on or beneath burial monuments

Although such cairns are a tiny minority of those recorded or dug, decorated cobble stones have been incorporated deliberately in some mounds, on the kerb stones of others, and in some cists. Some marked stones have been recovered from apparently 'unmarked' graves, as slabs over cremations in pits. Because archaeologists are now looking for marked rocks, the number of finds in association with burial monuments has increased considerably over recent years.

In the Barningham Moor area of Co. Durham, decorated slabs are embedded on the top of five cairns, all unexcavated, and there are four decorated slabs on Addlebrough cairn in Wensleydale.

Some round cairns in Northumberland are built over decorated outcrop, the classic example being at Fowberry Moor.

### **On standing stones and stone circles**

Sometimes a monument with motifs might be both a circle of stone and a burial site, such as Goatstones, Little Meg and Glassonby. Major sites such as Long Meg and Castlerigg circles include motifs, but it has proved so far impossible to ascertain when in the sequence of construction and change such motifs were made although their presence and position at least hints that the motifs were important. However, such sites remain rarities.

### **On and in rock shelters**

Four rock shelters in Northumberland: Corby Crag, Goatscrag, Ketley Crag, and a reported quarried-out site near Rothbury have motifs, the first two shelters containing food vessel and beaker burials with the motifs on the top of the overhang.

## **The Question of Chronology**

Simpson and Thawley, in an important paper published a quarter of a century ago (1972, 81-104), observed with regard to early Bronze Age cist slabs that:

'Except where a single motif is present the symbols appear to be scattered haphazardly over the surface of the stone and in at least one case...the surviving fragments may only be part of a larger design. Another shared feature is the irregular form of the stones themselves when used as either capstones or side slabs. These could only have been used in graves of very poor construction. In view of this feature it might be argued that the majority represent the re-use of stones originally decorated for some other purpose, later to be incorporated, somewhat clumsily, into a burial structure; in some cases this involved the breaking of the original slab to fit it in'.

Although not discussed at the time by Simpson and Thawley, this apparent 'breaking of the original slab' could have been the result of quarrying previously decorated bedrock, and in this respect it is also important to note that several examples were already much weathered by the time they were incorporated into their cists.

Another useful contribution to the chronology of cup-and-ring marks was provided by Haddingham in his important overview of British rock art studies in the mid 1970s. In a section entitled 'on stones in single graves, c2000-1400 BC' he notes that 'rather than imitate old patterns, the single grave builders evidently preferred to find existing decorated stones and to adapt them to fit in with the structure of their burial cists' (Haddingham 1974, 63). He then suggests, although acknowledging that the evidence is far from strong, that 'the distribution of carved cists may confirm the assumption that complex cup and ring carving had died out in some western districts by Bronze Age times, but that in eastern areas its influence persisted' (ibid, 64). In the context of the current paper it is important to note that these observations, while very relevant to the subject under discussion, are based

solely on a consideration of the Scottish evidence.

The next major contribution to the question of rock art chronology is that of Colin Burgess (1990). Burgess agrees with Simpson and Thawley that the rock art in cist burials is considerably older than the cists in which it is found. He states that 'the evidence for an early bronze age date is illusory; that cup and ring engraving was above all a phenomenon of the later Neolithic, c.2500-2100bc, which petered out during the copper age, c. 2500-1800 bc; and that cup-and-ring stones found in Early Bronze Age contexts represent their re-use as building material by people who had no notion of, or regard for, the original significance of the engravings'. He goes on to state, quite correctly, that the occurrence of cup-and-ring stones in early Bronze Age contexts is 'a snare and an delusion which offends against a fundamental archaeological law'. This law is simply that unless it can be demonstrated that the decoration on a stone within a cairn was produced specifically for that structure, then the dating of the decoration cannot be tied down to the period in which the cairn was built. It can be no later, but it may be a great deal earlier. Burgess makes a number of other observations, some of which the current writers fundamentally disagree with, but his basic conclusion that cup-and-ring art was essentially a later Neolithic phenomenon was fair in the light of the available evidence at that time.

Ian Hewitt (1991) has examined the rock motifs of Northumberland and their documentation to establish the potential of quantitative analysis, to develop detailed and objective recording methods, and to place rock motifs in a more securely dated timespan. His important thesis concludes:

'Attempts to place the creation of these motifs in the Earlier Bronze Age (c. 1700-1450bc) have been based on: (1) circumstantial evidence, and (2) subjective comparisons between the style of one group of motifs and that of another (e.g. North Britain with Galicia). Dates based upon interpretations of this kind cannot be secure. Quantitative analysis has demonstrated that the evidence provided by the rock motifs themselves indicates that quite a different interpretation is possible. Indeed, motifs found in sealed contexts suggest a late Neolithic date as a terminus ante quem for the mainstream of the North British style in Northumberland'.

Another contribution to this debate has been offered by Richard Bradley. Bradley shares the current writers' concerns over Burgess' view that the re-use of carved stones in Bronze Age structures occurred essentially by chance. He considers the relationships between rock art in various contexts (ie. original bedrock contexts and on various monuments including early Bronze Age burial cairns) before concluding that the decorated slabs in early Bronze Age cairns were indeed reused but that they were reused in a structured way and certainly not by chance as suggested by Burgess. He goes on to offer an appealing interpretation of the phenomenon of reuse, citing a number of Scottish examples. His conclusion is that 'symbols that may once have addressed to the wider world were turned around and directed towards the dead person. Messages inscribed on a landscape that was already receding into myth were relayed exclusively to the ancestors' (Bradley 1992, 176).

More recently, Waddington (forthcoming) has argued

that the cup and ring phenomenon had its origins in the earlier Neolithic, and that most decorated outcrops were already in existence by 3200 cal BC. He believes that 'the carving of symbols on the exposed rock.....is thought to be linked to a pastoral cycle, within which the 'places' constituted by the carvings feature prominently as the destination of localised transhumance routes'. Waddington cogently argues that the later Neolithic (3200-2000 cal BC) saw an 'appropriation' of the long established cup and ring tradition, whereby the carved symbols were incorporated within monuments thus helping to sanctify and sanction a new ideological and social order. The previous significance of the carvings was then 'expropriated' or eclipsed in the early Bronze Age, when they became directly associated with the finality of death through association with single burials. This was a time in which 'reminders of collective activities and a relationship of custodial tenure with the landscape had no place', and it may have been 'a short transition period of intense change' which saw the 'incorporation of carvings in burial monuments and thus the nullification and expropriation of the cup and ring tradition by literally laying it to rest with the deceased'. Waddington's persuasive model is based on a consideration of all the available evidence from Britain and Ireland, but it is important in the context of this paper to stress that nobody has yet managed to date even a single example of northern English rock art to the early Neolithic. As will be discussed later, there appears to be much regional variation in the production and use of rock art, and it is dangerous to assume that sequences identified elsewhere are necessarily of relevance to northern England.

In this paper we will attempt to build on Bradley's and Waddington's discussions, but with particular reference to northern England. In order to do this we will consider a number of potentially relevant sites before drawing together a possible interpretation. It is important to stress that the dating of open air outcrops remains fraught with difficulty, and can only really be attempted by analogy. Consequently we will limit our discussion largely to structures of possible early Bronze Age date which incorporate rock art.

## THE EVIDENCE

This paper does not seek to consider every example of possible Bronze Age rock art, but rather a number of significant structures are discussed which include all of the most likely contenders for a Bronze Age date. Sites in Northumberland and Cumbria are given both a grid reference and a record number based on a database system devised by Hewitt (1991) which is used by Beckensall in his recent publications and which it is hoped will eventually be accessible to the public via the internet. It has not been possible to illustrate all the sites discussed here, but a selection of illustrations is included for the benefit of readers not familiar with the material.

We begin to examine the evidence by looking at examples of cist slabs, as burials and cremations can often be dated. The first point to stress is that rock art has been found on only a very small percentage of excavated cists throughout the area under consideration. Hewitt (1991, 50) demonstrates this point through his examination of Canon Greenwell's

excavations in Northumberland: 'Immediately apparent is that of the 32 barrows listed, a total of 2 were found to contain rock motifs'. Neither of these two (a reniform motif on a side slab from a cist at Harbottle Peels and a cup mark on the underside of a stone beneath an inverted urn at The Fawns, both freshly pecked and in early Bronze Age contexts) is a characteristic example of Northumberland rock art. On the wider stage, there is much variation in the use of rock art after its production. While some Scottish cists undoubtedly do incorporate fragments of quarried decorated bedrock, the general applicability of this model is open to question. Van Hoek (1997, 14) observes that 'Of the more than one hundred kists reported in Donegal, the area with the biggest concentration of cup-and-ring art in Ireland, *none* bears any decoration. In the petroglyph regions of Scotland and England, only very few kists are decorated. Galloway, the area with the densest concentration of cup-and-ring sites, has *not a single kist* with cup-and-ring tradition'. In fact there may be one such decorated cist in Galloway, but as this is the altogether special site of Cairnholly I it doesn't detract in any way from this general observation.

## Rock art associated with burial monuments

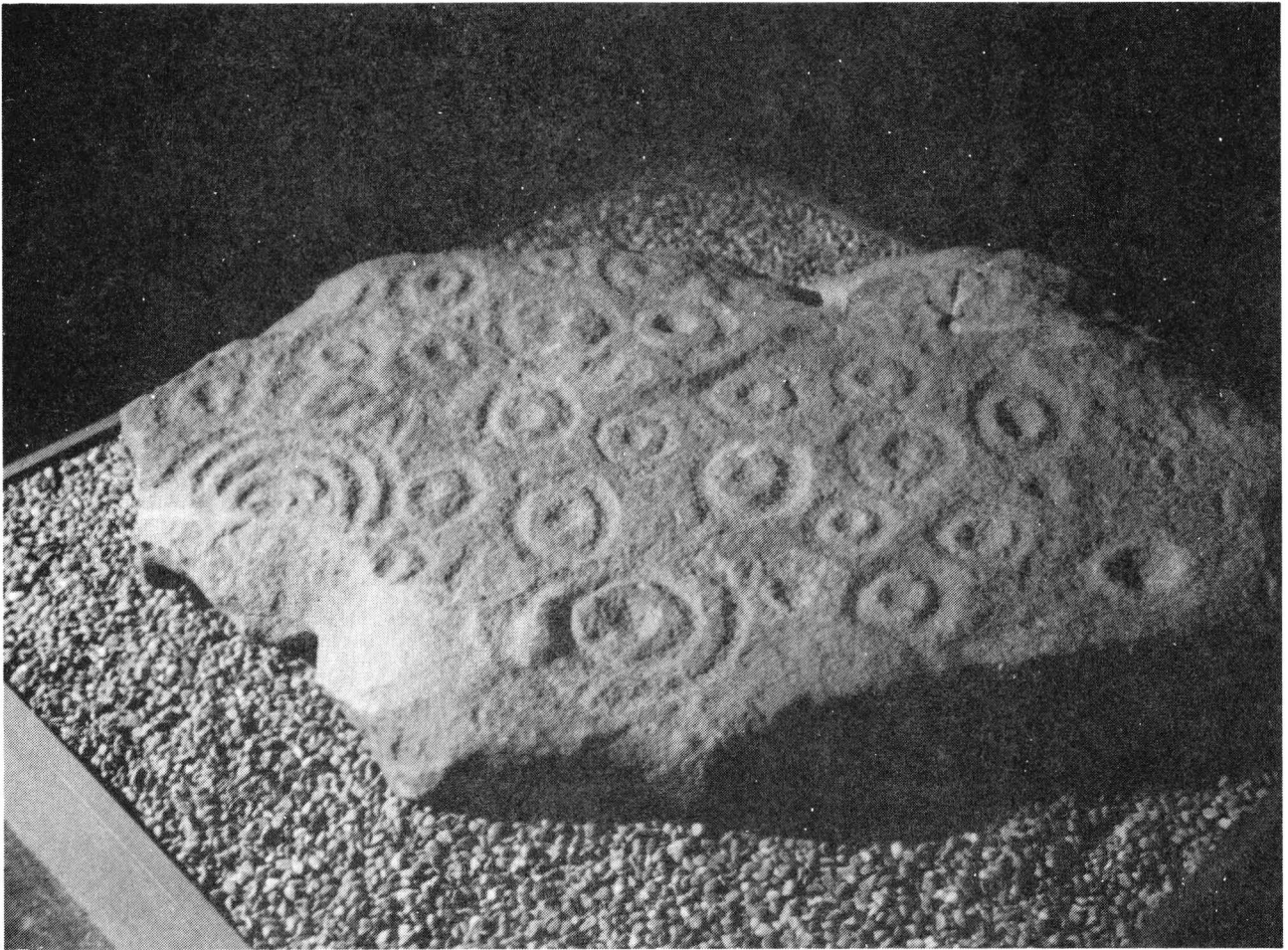
### Cist slabs

We discuss all definite examples of decorated cist slabs and some probable ones in their contexts to see whether they can be attributed to a particular period. It is worth noting at this early stage that much has been made in recent years of the possible re-use of earlier decorated rocks based on the occurrence of apparently weathered decoration from sealed contexts (most often as cist slabs) within monuments, where the weathering simply could not have occurred. In contrast, some decoration on cist slabs appears to be pristine, and thus could never have been exposed to the elements for any length of time. The actual rate at which a decorated surface would have weathered following its production is obviously dependent on a number of factors, and would have varied from site to site. It is also possible, however unlikely, that a motif could have been buried soon after its production, to be recovered at a later date for incorporation into a monument. However, for the purposes of this paper, and in the absence of any clearer evidence, markings in pristine condition are considered to have been produced specially for the contexts in which they were discovered.

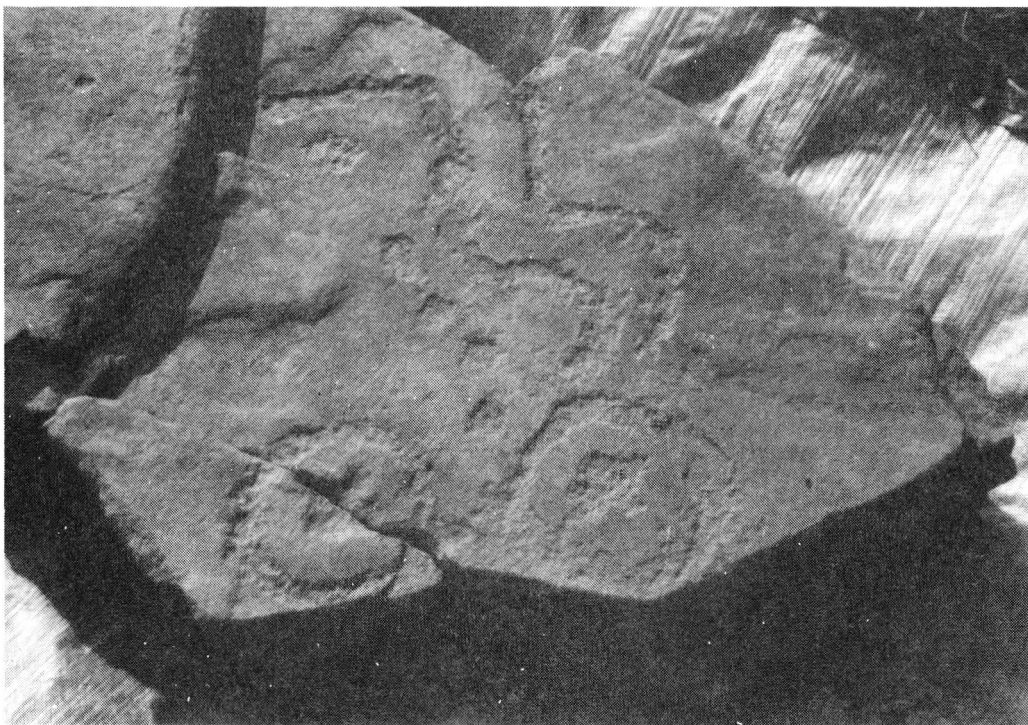
### Fulforth Farm, Witton Gilbert, Co. Durham.

(Plates 1 & 2; fig 1)

In 1995 a large flat sandstone was removed during ploughing in an area with extensive views over a valley, and signs of a probable dispersed cairn (Wright 1997). The site was excavated in August, 1996, under the direction of Fiona Baker and the supervision of James Wright in collaboration with Niall Hammond of Durham County Council and Anthony Harding of Durham University. Post excavation work is currently in



*Plate 1. The underside of the decorated capstone from the Witton Gilbert cist.*



*Plate 2. Decorated stone from the Witton Gilbert cist.*

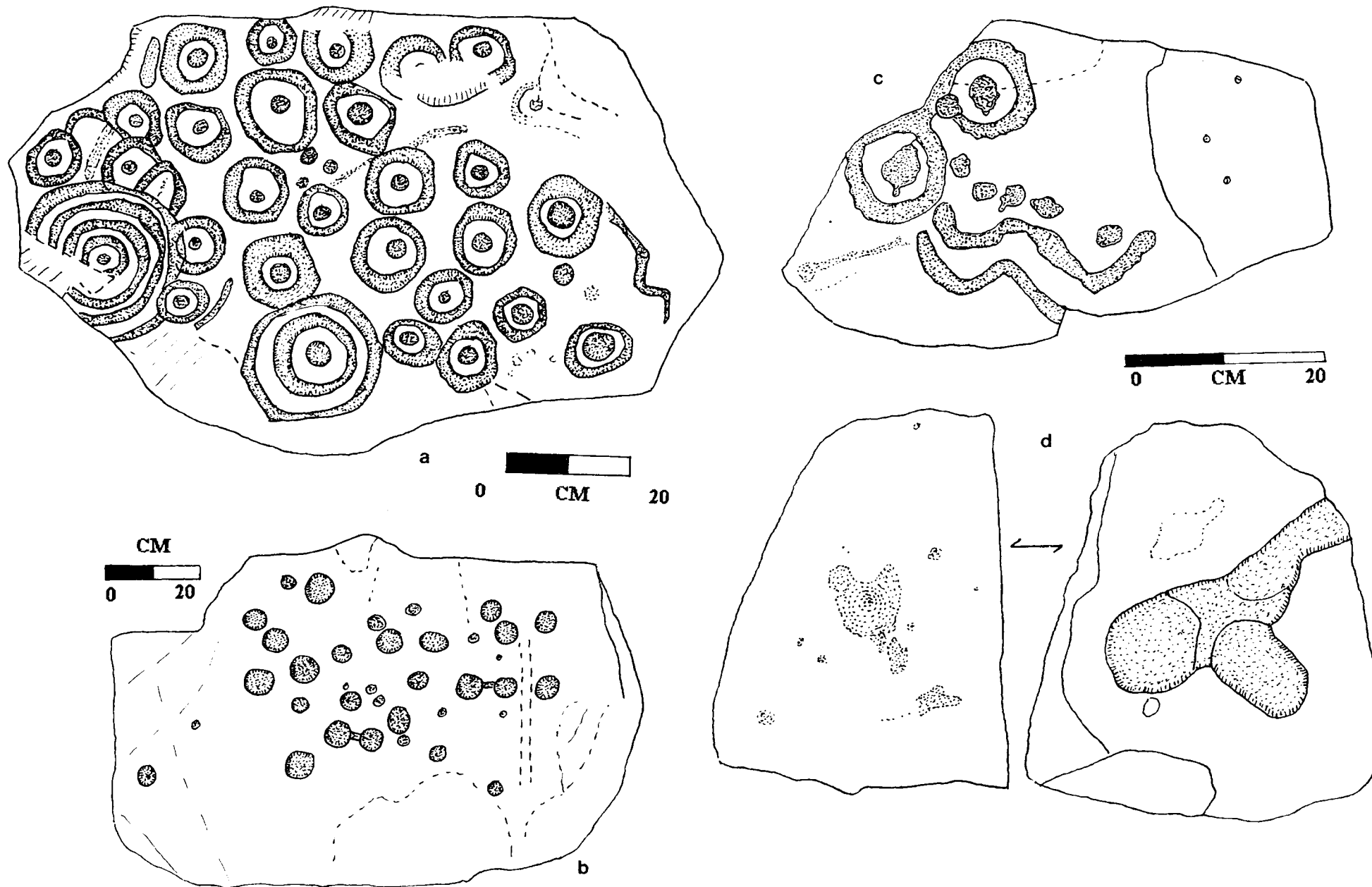


Fig. 1. Decorated stones from the Witton Gilbert cist: a = capstone (underside); b = capstone (upper side); c = vertical slab from the cist; d = boulder decorated on both sides from the cist floor.

progress and the site will be fully published in due course.

There were two major discoveries at the site: an oval pit packed with stones, containing scattered bone, flint flakes, and a fine retouched plano-convex knife, and a complex pit originally covered by a decorated slab, containing charcoal and flints.

The cist pit was of an unusual, subcircular form, and was divided into two sections. The north rectangle was a stone-lined cist that supported the cover, and two of the interior stones were marked. Both are illustrated here. One is a flat slab with a pattern of cups, rings and parallel zig-zags or serpentine grooves reminiscent of Irish Passage Grave art. All the pick marks are visible, including the tentative beginnings of an unfinished design. The slab was packed in vertically with its decoration facing outwards, and part of it had been broken off in antiquity although there is nothing to suggest that the slab had been removed from a decorated outcrop. The other stone was a small boulder with fresh pick marks on two faces, tamped down on the floor of the cist.

The south half of the pit was a rectangle of small rounded cobbles, among which were cremations, apparently deliberately placed in circular arrangements of cobbles. In the SW corner of this arrangement a polished stone axe had been set on end, its edge facing upwards.

The cap stone sealed only the north part of the pit, which contained charcoal and a flint scraper. All the finds point to a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age date, but on current evidence the cist can not be firmly accepted as Bronze Age. Further research may determine the date of the charcoal, and more information may become available from bone, phosphate and environmental analysis.

This is the first cist incorporating marked stones to have been excavated in northern England using modern archaeological techniques. It is clear that the capstone was not re-used decorated outcrop rock, but was quarried specifically to fit the cist, and was meticulously prepared by pecking all over its under-surface. This diffuse pecking is also a characteristic of Irish passage grave art. The rock was then covered with cups and single rings, and in one place a four-ringed motif around a cup was added, but this figure both cut through others and was cut through, apparently demonstrating a change in plan. Double concentric circles around a cup have been squeezed in between single-ringed figures. A zig-zag motif and ringless cups provide other anomalies in the general design.

This carefully decorated surface was placed downwards over the cist pit, and is today as fresh as the day it was made, sealing in the deposits. When it was dragged out in 1995, small fragments of it were broken off, but most have been recovered and added to the drawing (fig. 1). The upper side of the capstone, which was vulnerable to plough-scarring, was covered with plain cups, two sets of which are joined by a short groove. The simple cups bear no comparison with the complexity of the motifs on the underside. Had the cups been eroded, it would have been tempting to suggest that the slab had been quarried from a marked outcrop, but their condition suggests that they were produced at the time of the cist's construction.

The oval pit may not be directly connected in time or function with the cist, but phosphate analysis suggests that

it had a funerary/ritual function (Jim Wright, pers. comm.). The plano-convex knife, lying at the very base of the pit, is only the eighth of its type found in funerary contexts throughout Cumbria, Northumberland and Durham (Annable, 1987) but to this we must add one found at How Tallon cairn overlooking Barningham Moor. Three of these knives were associated with food vessels and urns, which makes a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age date likely for this one.

Crucially, although the only artefact recovered from within the cist was a flint scraper, a radiocarbon date is expected for the construction of the cist pit and other samples from within the cist may prove datable. The stone axe, and perhaps also the plano-convex knife, suggest that the earliest phase of this site dates from the Neolithic, but the cist sealed by the decorated slab may be later.

### **Gainford**

(NZ 1708 1692, now in Bowes Museum, Co. Durham. Plate 3, fig. 2).

This large slab is particularly important not only for the variety of its motifs, but because they occur on both sides. An uneven top surface has been used partly by taking advantage of the natural irregularities. Long grooves divide the surface into four areas, each occupied by cups, some surrounded by from one to four concentric circles. There are uneven signs of wear which could mean that part of the slab was exposed following decoration, or that the stone was marked at different periods (Beckensall & Laurie, forthcoming). Some of the grooves are very finely pecked (towards the lower right hand side of fig. 2a), and they are very close together where the surface of the rock is smoothest. The upper right-hand side shows more signs of erosion, as though that part of the rock had been exposed to weathering. The left-hand side, at a lower level, has bolder and cruder technique, but the fresh pick markings show that none of it was exposed to erosion. The intention of the motif-makers has been to use as much of the rock as possible: it is very 'busy'. There is also a strong sense of fluidity, of interconnection of cups to grooves and grooves to grooves.

The reverse side is quite different. It is slightly domed, and the motifs, cups and grooves, are well spaced. The concept is much simpler, with clear pick marks. Some pick marks are very light, showing signs particularly at the lower right-hand side (fig. 2b) that they were toying with the idea of adding a ring or two.

This is a likely candidate for a cist cover, but whether the more elaborate pattern originally faced downwards or not is unclear. The idea of marking two sides in a different way is well illustrated by this and the Fulforth Farm stone. The Gainford slab has no firm context, but its similarity to the capstone from Fulforth Farm, and the way in which the designs fill the stone surfaces so purposefully, suggest that it may have belonged to a similar form of monument.

### **The Greta Bridge stone**

(NZ 0905 1295, now at Bowes Museum, Co. Durham).

This slab was found during the widening of the A66, 400m. from the Roman fort, and had apparently been re-used as a cover for a Roman burial (Beckensall & Laurie, 1998). It has much in common with the simple designs in the area generally,

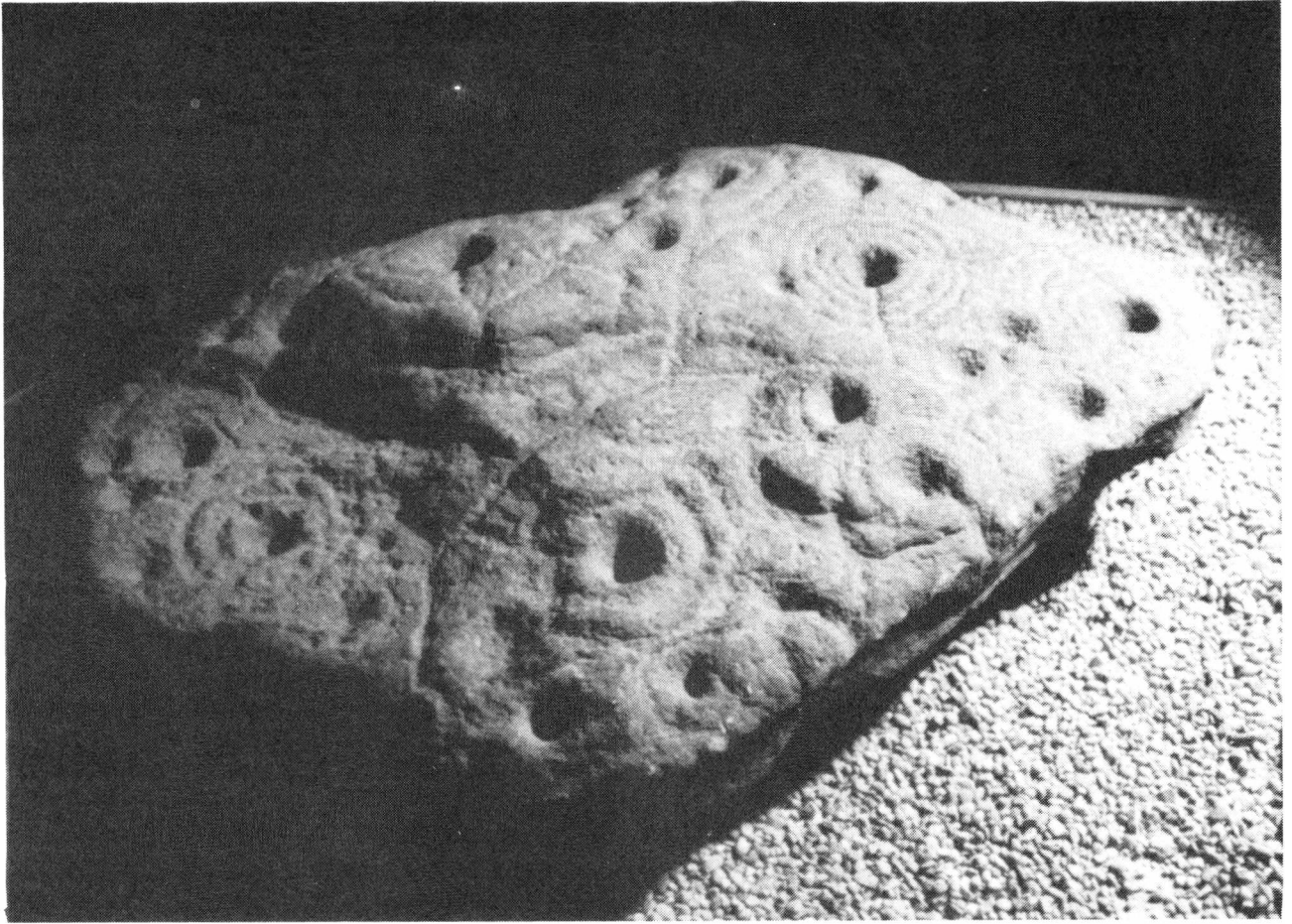


Plate 3. The Gainford slab.

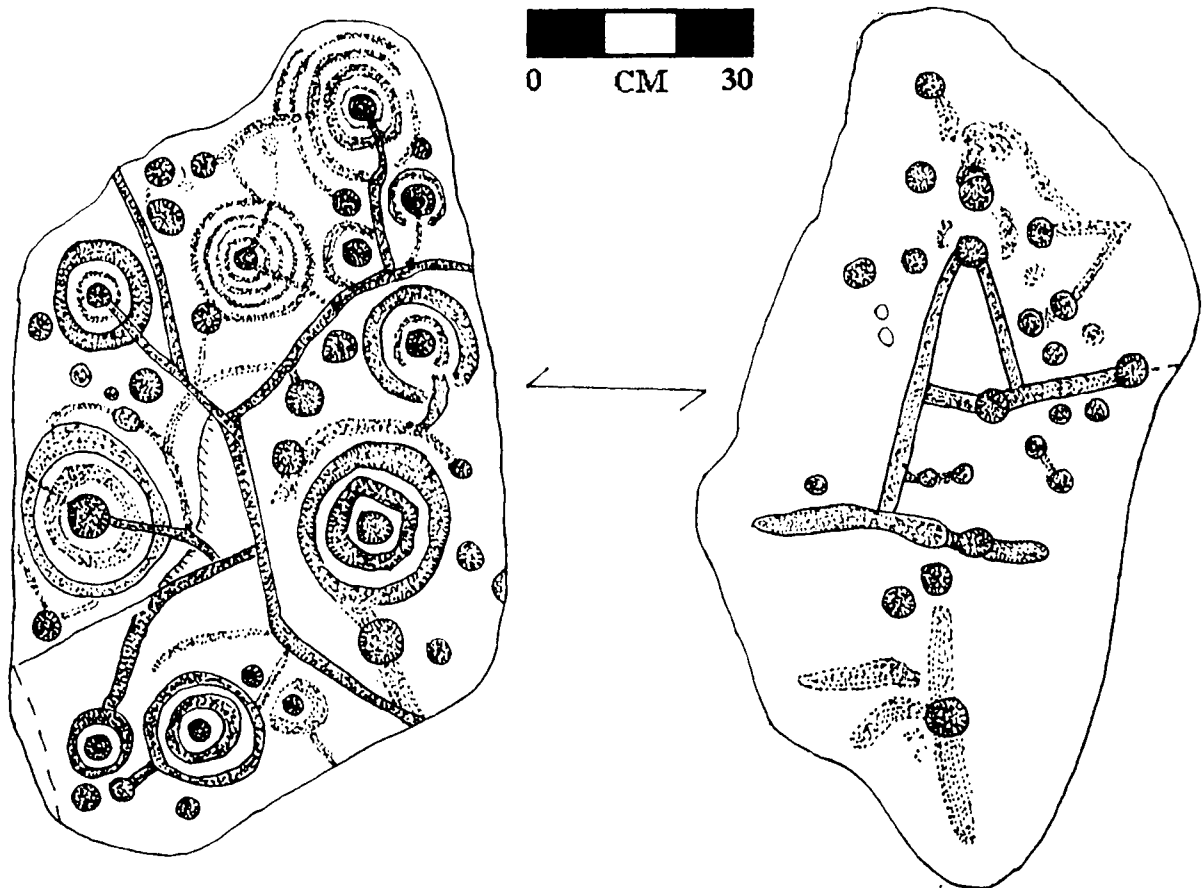


Fig. 2. a = the Gainford slab, presumed lower face. b = the Gainford slab, presumed upper face.

the main motifs being well-defined cups and some connecting grooves, but there is at the top of the rock an arrangement of grooves that looks like an attempt to produce chevrons which are curved rather than angular. This type of motif is unusual in Britain, but is seen in some Neolithic passage grave traditions. This stone has no prehistoric context, but it would be dangerous to regard the art as Roman simply because of the circumstances of its discovery. The most likely explanation is that the stone was re-used from an earlier monument of some kind.

#### **Pike Hill, Ouston.**

(H00749. NZ 0774 7048. Plate 4).

Two decorated rocks were found in what was apparently a secondary, roughly paved cist within a tumulus (Beckensall 1983). One of the end stones of this cist had a single cupmark. Adjacent to the cist, but not in its original position, was the probable cover slab which is now in the Museum of Antiquities at Newcastle. This is an unusual design, but the point to stress here is that the markings are still pristine, with clearly defined peck marks which show no signs of weathering. The assumption must be that the stone was produced specially for the burial in question, and that it had probably lain undisturbed until not long before the excavation of the site. Hewitt (1991) comments that this 'is not sound evidence for forging a link between the effervescent outcrop motifs and the rites of Earlier Bronze Age death and burial/cremation', but the fact that this design contains no rings doesn't mean that we should necessarily classify it as simple rather than complex. Indeed, the linking of deep cups to form a trapeze brings to mind the rare rectangular and square designs of Dod Law and elsewhere. If it did not come from the disturbed cist, it is difficult to explain what else it might have been doing in the barrow. Its shape, irregular though it may be, could have covered a cist described as being 2'10" x 2' x 17" deep.

#### **Redhills, Cumbria.**

(H01118, NY 50182777. Fig. 3a).

A large slab decorated with a multitude of cup and cup-and-ring marks formed the cover of an apparently rock-cut cist which was lined with cobbles and which contained a cremation. No grave goods were recorded. It was noted at the time of its discovery that the decorated slab was pristine, 'as if done yesterday' (Taylor 1883, 110-118). Consequently, we may assume that the decoration was produced specially for the cist in question, a probability strengthened by the disposition of motifs on the stone. The decorated side of the slab had peck-marks 'dispersed apparently all over the surface' (ibid), as does the Witton Gilbert slab described above. Grooves running the length of the slab are not dissimilar to those on the Gainford stone. Sadly, the Redhills stone has been lost.

#### **Little Meg, Cumbria.**

(H001102. NY 57963749. Fig. 3b).

As with so many other sites, the archaeological record is so imprecise that it is difficult to understand the sequence of events here. The original form seems to have been a small circle of about eleven large boulders, the centre of which contained a semi-ovoid cist within which were an urn and burnt bones (Beckensall 1992a). Within the cist were two cup

and ring stones that may or may not be part of the cist construction, and there is no evidence that they were originally made for the cist. One of the kerbs, however, displays a finely executed spiral linked to concentric circles. At present it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty whether any of this decoration is Bronze Age.

#### **Dod Law, Doddington, Northumberland.**

(NU 998 325. Fig. 3c).

Dod Law has some of the most impressive rock art in Britain, displaying a wide variety of motifs. Those excavated within the hillfort complex (Smith 1989) are certainly earlier than the fort and its extensions, although the relationship between rock art and hillforts at a number of sites is certainly of interest. Were hillforts such as Dod Law built on top of decorated outcrops for simple practical reasons (because both were independently occupying a significant position in the landscape), or could the presence of already ancient rock art have been a significant factor in the location of some forts? There is not space to elaborate on this idea here, but it is safe to assume that the rock art is not Iron Age, even though it appears in several cases to be linked with hillforts. It is the discovery of so-called cist covers and a vague record of many barrows in the area, mostly destroyed, that has traditionally linked the motifs to the early Bronze Age. One large slab now on show in the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle, is convincing as a purpose-made cist cover, as its design fits the rock and there is considerable pecking over its surface, but in the absence of any context it cannot be attributed either to a specific period or to a specific function (Beckensall 1991).

#### **Hazelrigg, Northumberland.**

(H00468)

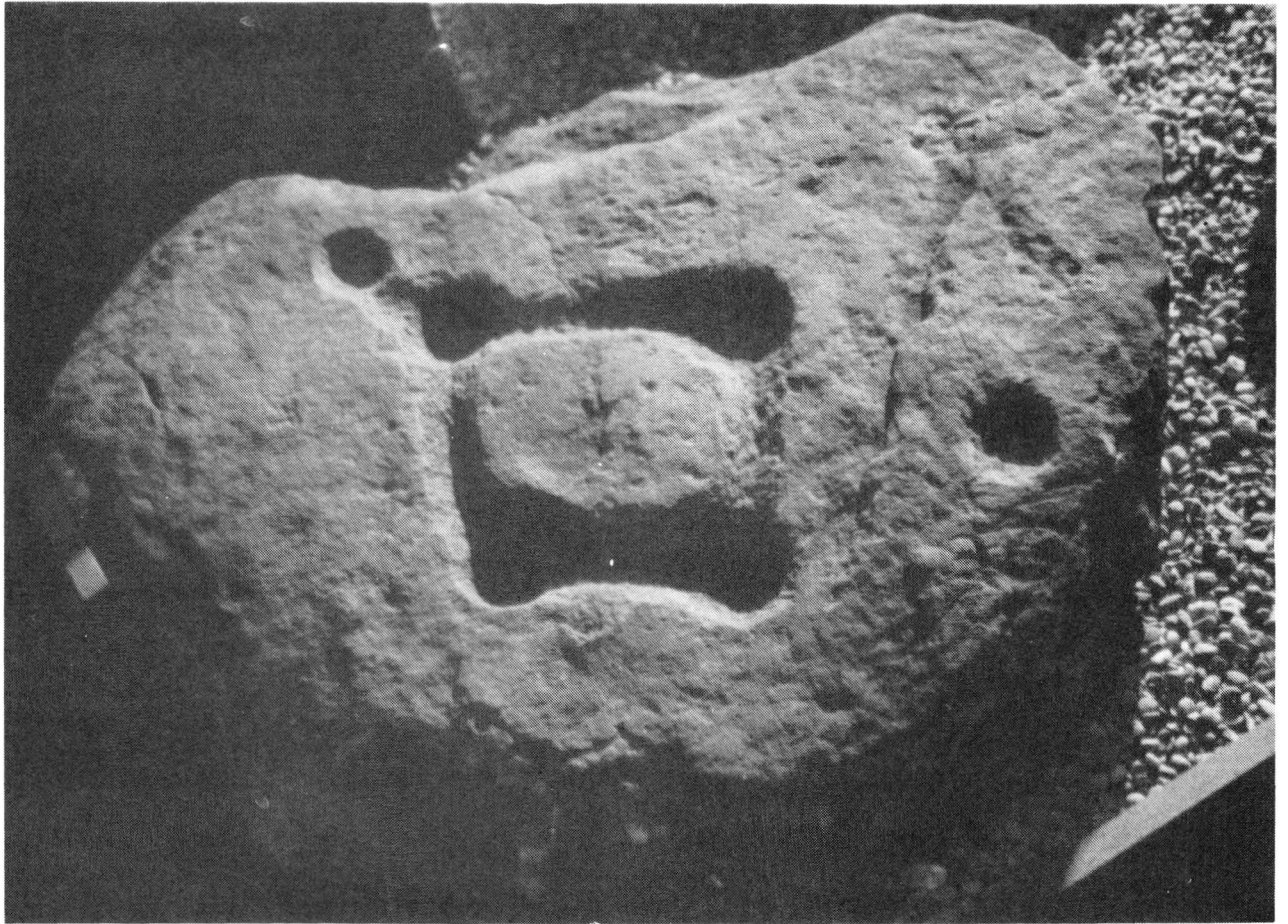
Although not from a secure context, the decorated stones from this area consist of a large possible cist cover and three smaller decorated stones (Beckensall 1991). In all cases the pecking is fresh and the stones have not been exposed to the elements for any length of time.

Although there is no firm context for the largest slab (now at NU 0461 3269), and although the motifs do not include the usual type of cups and rings, the way in which the surface is covered with fresh cups and intricate linear motifs on its hollowed surface, and the fact that it has been dragged to the edge of a field along with many cobbles from an area where prehistoric graves have been recorded, suggests that it may have been a cist cover. However, we are unable to date it.

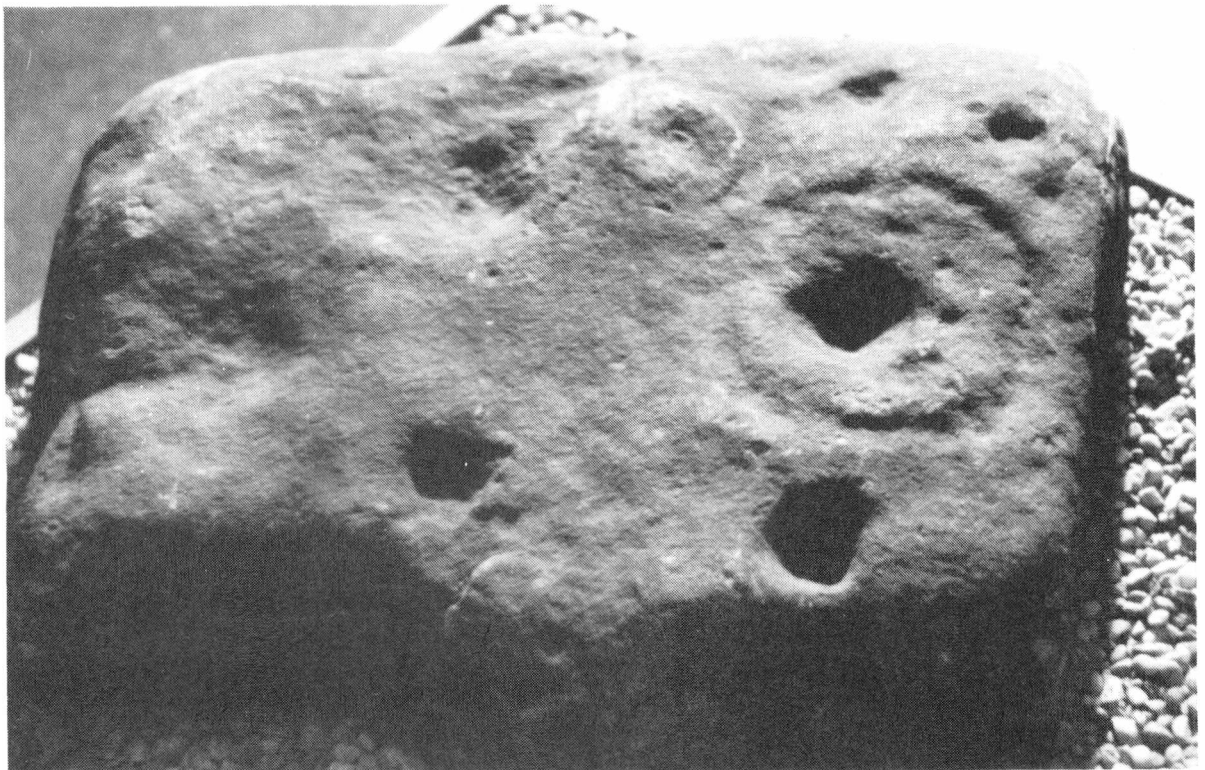
#### **Beanley, Northumberland.**

Two decorated stones which on the basis of their size and shape were regarded by their finders as cist slabs were recovered from Beanley Moor in the middle of the last century (fig. 3d; Beckensall 1992). There are no detailed contexts for either, so neither is dateable. The complex design on the first of these slabs (H00591. NU 1015 1855) suggests that the design was placed on the stone rather than the stone having been removed from an already decorated outcrop, and the markings on the stone still appear today as freshly pecked. The decoration had evidently not been exposed to the elements for any great length of time before being incorporated





*Plate 4. Pike Hill, Ouston.*



*Plate 5. Black Heddon. Stone reportedly from a barrow.*

within a monument, presumably a burial cairn, where it probably lay undisturbed for most of the next four millennia.

A second decorated slab (H00592) from the same area, now also in Alnwick Castle Museum, displays a cup with four concentric rings. Although not so convincing as the above as a possible cist slab its decoration has been carefully placed on the slab to occupy its entire width, and it is inconceivable that the slab could have been quarried from a decorated outcrop without the design having been damaged. The freshness of the motifs also argues against such an origin.

### **Harbottle Peels, Northumberland**

(H00725. NT943047).

This reniform or foot-shaped motif was discovered by Greenwell on the inward-facing south side of a cist (Beckensall 1992). The multiple burials within the rest of the mound were accompanied by food vessels, presumably all of early Bronze Age date. The motif itself bears no relation to the general cup-and-ring style, and in any case there is no dated material to confirm the period of origin of the cist.

### **Ingram, Northumberland.**

In 1997, excavations undertaken by the Northumberland National Park/University of Durham 'Ingram and Upper Breamish Valley Landscape Project' resulted in the discovery of a cist with a food vessel, cremations and segmented beads at the centre of an extremely complex yet previously unrecognised early Bronze Age cairn. The andesite cist cover has a possible cup mark at one end, and the cist pit contained two possible cup marked stones. More work at this site, which may prove to be of relevance to this paper, is planned for summer 1998.

### **Summary**

To sum up, not one of the decorated stones so far discussed was recovered from a demonstrably secure Bronze Age context. The Fulforth Farm stone is the only certain purpose-made cist cover incorporating typical cup and ring motifs that seals in earlier or contemporary material which we have a chance of dating scientifically. Unfortunately this date is not available at the time of writing, although it will obviously represent a crucial piece of evidence to the whole question of the dating of rock art. Each of the other certain and possible cist slabs discussed above has something interesting to tell us about rock art, and each just *might* be Bronze Age.

## **Stones covering cremations**

### **Ford Westfield, Northumberland.**

(Three examples at NT939370).

During the ploughing of a field east of Ford Westfield House in 1850, 20 cremations in small hollows, each covered with a stone, were discovered (Beckensall 1983). Three of these covering stones were decorated, one with an elaborate cup-and-three-rings motif, and the other two with cupmarks only. No artefacts were recovered from these burials, so they remain undated. It is important to note that none of the cremations was contained within a cist so they were by no means standard early Bronze Age burials: they may just as

easily have been Neolithic.

### **The Fawns, Kirkwhelpington, Northumberland.**

(H00751. NZ008853).

A stone with a single cup mark was found in association with an inverted cinerary urn. Such a clear association between a Bronze Age burial and rock art is unusual, but it is important to note that only a cupmark (rather than any complex motifs) was present here. Hewitt (1991) observes that of the thirty-two Greenwell excavations in his study area there were seventeen instances of stones covering cremations, and this was the only one that displayed any form of decoration.

### **Black Heddon**

(H00745 a-d. NZ084752. Plate 5).

Documentation of these lost stones is unreliable. Four stones in the general area were reported: cup stones over cremations in a barrow, a cup and ring stone with a cremation urn, cup marks on a barrow stone and cup marks on a stone covering a cremation (Beckensall 1983). Because we have such unsatisfactory reports, these are four cases of associations between cup or cup-and-ring marks and funerary rites that can only be noted, without any possibility of dating them. We cannot say that the motifs were on re-used slabs, or made specifically for burial. Burgess (1991) and Waddington (1996) use one of these stones as a classic example of the reuse of decorated and weathered outcrop rock in a funerary context. However, this is not a good example to use as the context is very insecure.

## **Stones within the mounds of burial cairns**

There are many sites in Northumberland and County Durham where the incidence of marked cobbles in cairns needs to be explained. While some of these cairns have been described as field clearance rather than funerary, we must bear in mind that such cairns may have covered inhumations without a cist, and in many such cases the bodies will not have survived for long in the acid moorland soils.

It is only recently that many such sites with decorated stones incorporated in their structure have been identified. The cobbles cannot be explained away as building material that happened to be lying around at the time, as so many of them, with fresh peck marks, are purpose-made. Neither do the motifs on the cobbles have to be 'finished'.

The **Hinderwell Beacon**, Yorkshire, (NZ794178) with its 150 examples has been known longest, but the prominent **How Tallon Cairn**, Co. Durham (NY 057 064) excavated in 1897, and re-assessed in 1980, had at least 8 cup-marked cobbles that were thrown out during excavation and built into a wall over the cairn. These were ignored during the excavation. The artefacts recovered included food vessels and beaker. Nearby are two unexcavated cairns (**Frankinshaw Moor; Osmonds Gill**) that have marked stones embedded on the top surface, the latter of the cup and ring type. Three other cairns on Barningham Moor have cup marked stones on the surface, and all these lie in an wide area which has about ninety decorated rock panels (Beckensall & Laurie. forthcoming).

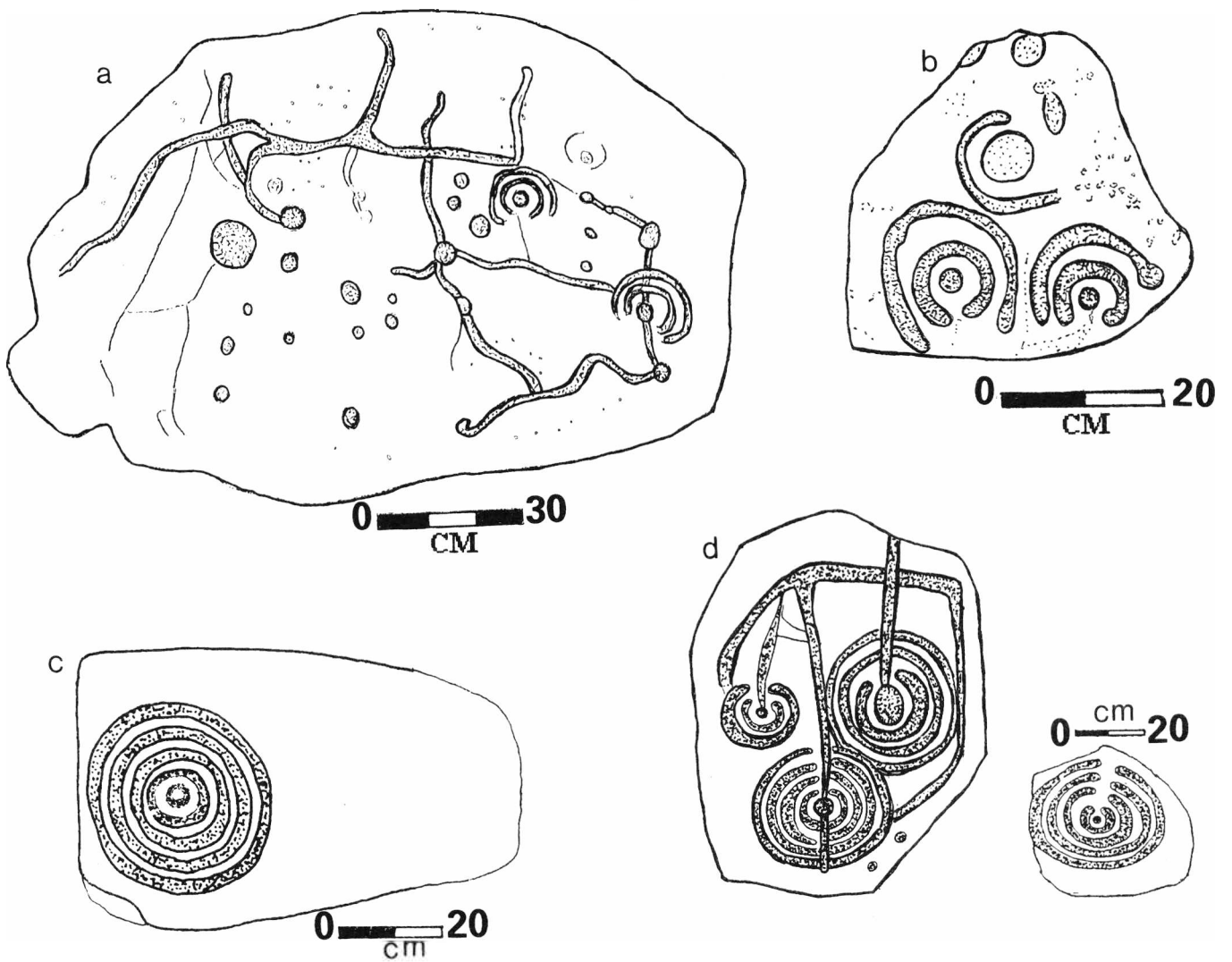


Fig. 3. a = Redhills cist slab (lower face). b = Little Meg, slab from cist. c = Dod Law, probable cist slab. d = Beanley, possible cist slabs.

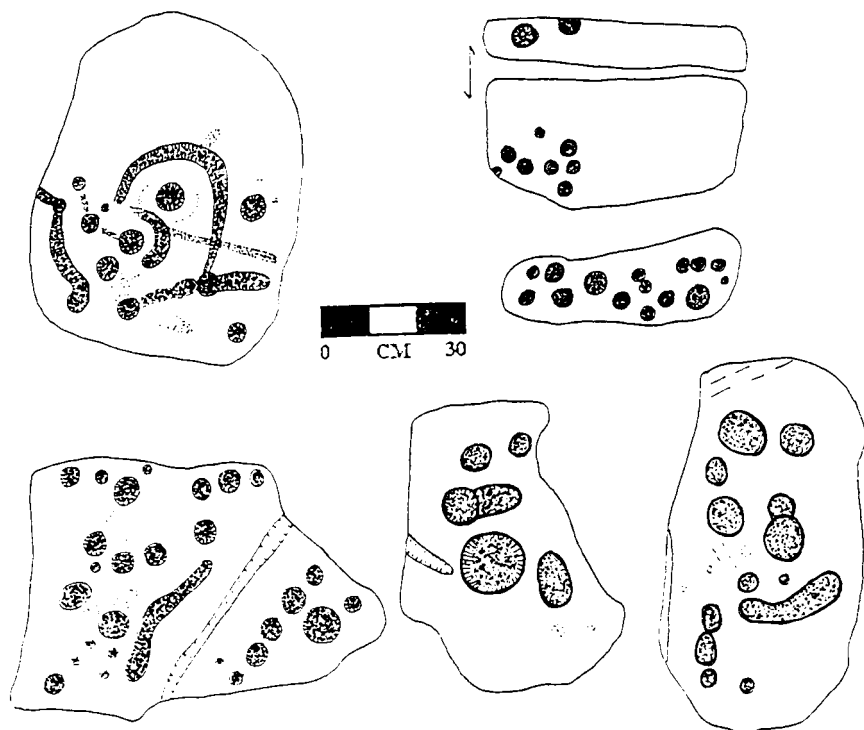


Fig. 4. Selection of decorated stones from cairns on Barningham Moor.

At **Pitland Hills**, Northumberland (H00763. NY887 793), seventeen marked stones, varying in shape and size, came from a large burial mound with two cists, a food vessel and a cinerary urn. The stones were photographed, but are now lost. Again, there is not sufficient data to put the marked stones into a clear chronological context, but on balance it would be fair to assume that they are early Bronze Age.

**Fowberry and Weetwood** mounds, Northumberland (H00523, NU01972784 and H00511, NU02152810. Beckensall 1991), although previously disturbed, were excavated using modern methods, and clearly demonstrate the need for the careful examination of every single stone in such monuments. As in the case of the Blawearie Cairns excavation (Hewitt & Beckensall 1996), this may lead to a thorough examination of every stone without a single cup mark being found, but such negative evidence is important: why should decorated stones be present in some cairns but not in others?

Fowberry cairn not only had four of its double kerbstone ring stones marked, but the whole structure lay on profusely and apparently freshly decorated outcrop (plate 6). No burials were found, and the only artefact was a flint scraper between outcrop and mound, but twenty stones from the mound were marked (fig. 5), including a countersunk cup and double penannulars and radiates on a cobble (by any standards a 'complex' motif).

The Weetwood site, which sadly was partially bulldozed prior to its excavation, was an oval cairn with one large kerbstone the inner (and hidden) face of which displays multiple concentric circles and three radial grooves (plate 7). Thirty-seven decorated cobbles were recovered from the body of the cairn (plate 8), most of which lay with their decorated sides facing downwards. These were not intended to be seen once the cairn had been constructed. Again, no evidence for a burial was recovered, and we cannot date the monument. Such discoveries suggest that the large number of marked cobbles recovered in Northumberland (in field clearance heaps, stone walls etc.) may have originally belonged within now-destroyed burial cairns.

#### **The Glassonby Circle, Cumbria.**

(H01115. NY 57293934)

This monument includes a remarkable kerbstone: concentric circles, semi-ovals, chevrons and other linear features on one inward-facing surface (Beckensall 1992a). Another marked stone is missing. Although there were many finds, it is impossible to tie in the motifs on the stone with any specific period.

#### **Moor Divock, Cumbria.**

(H01124; NY 49402196).

A single cup and ring mark has been recorded on a cairn here that contained 'ashes and a broken vessel' along with a food vessel apparently in a secondary context (Beckensall 1995, 25). The discovery of such a motif here is important, and suggests that others at similar sites may await discovery. However, the chronology of the monument remains unclear so the site has little to offer the present discussion.

#### **Old Parks, Kirkoswald, Cumbria.**

(H01103. NY 56993988).

This complex and confusing site is mentioned here because

a massive cairn had contained a row of five stones, three of which were marked mainly with a crude type of spiral resembling a shepherd's crook, a scatter of thirty-two deposits of burnt bones in hollows, accompanied by broken 'urns', incense cups, and beads (Frodsham 1989; Beckensall 1992a). There were two trenches for graves cut into the original ground surface. This is a site that has been considerably modified over a wide time span, and is a good example of the kind of problem that faces us: the confusion within the archaeological record makes it impossible for us to work out a chronological sequence, although the artefacts point to its final episode being in the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age. The rock art is quite different from the north British cup-and-ring tradition. It may be earlier, contemporary, or later, but it tells us absolutely nothing about the chronology of cup-and-ring marks.

The incidence of decorated kerbstones on round cairns and of other marked stones within mounds remains unexplained. We must keep our options open, and remember that the recognition of the widespread nature of this phenomenon is relatively recent.

**Lilburn Hill Farm.** The final site to consider here is the unique burial monument at Lilburn, Northumberland (H00528, NU 013 256) discovered and excavated in the nineteenth Century (Beckensall 1983, 152). This consisted of a large pit containing layered cremations along with a standing stone decorated with horned spiral and concentric circle motifs. This is likely to be a Neolithic structure and its position would make it ideal as a long barrow site. However, this cannot be proved, and a careful re-excavation of the site might prove to be of great value. The pristine nature of the motifs suggests that the decoration may have been produced specially for this site (Frodsham 1996, 111).

### **Rock art beneath round cairns**

Interest in Northumberland has recently focussed on cairns that stand on already-marked earthfast boulders or outcrop rock, which may point to a continuing tradition of venerating a site (Bradley & Mathews, forthcoming). We know of five such sites: the **Horseshoe Rock** at Lordenshaws (H00681); the **Rothbury Cairn** (H00683); **Dod Law** (H00431); **Ringses** (H00461), and **Fowberry** (H00523, plate 6) (see Beckensall 1991 & 1992 for details of all these). Although it is possible that the underlying markings pre-date these cairns, the example of Fowberry, where all the markings on outcrop and in the cairn are pristine, suggests that they may in some cases be contemporary. However, none of these examples are securely dated.

### **Possible cist quarries**

A final consideration is that there is a small number of sites where motif-covered slabs were removed from outcrop, and two cases where the removed part was 're-sanctified' with the addition of fresh motifs. The famous main rock at Dod Law may have been used in this way, but sites at **North Plantation**



Plate 6. Decorated outcrop rock sealed beneath the Fowberry cairn.

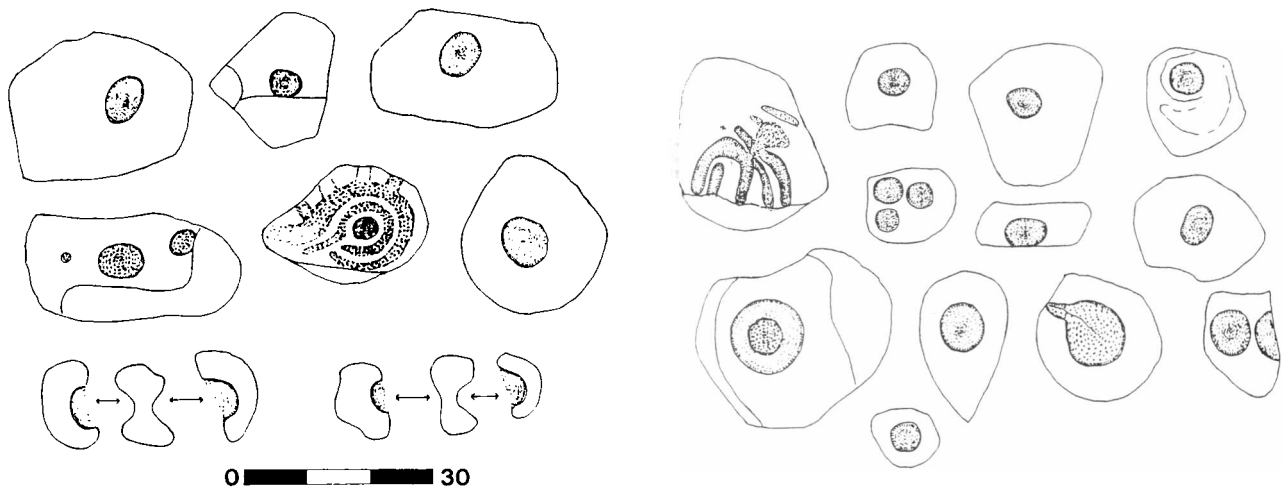
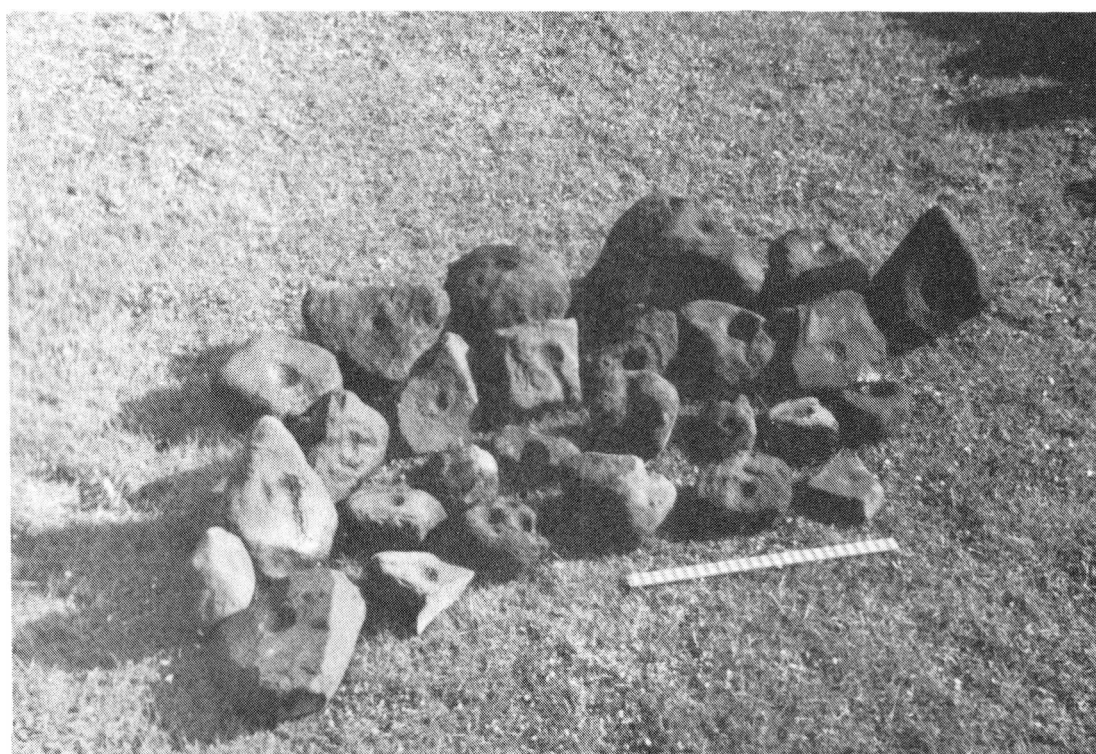


Fig. 5. Selection of decorated stones from the Fowberry cairn.



*Plate 7. Decorated kerbstone in the Weetwood cairn (note that the decorated face originally faced inwards).*



*Plate 8. Decorated stones from the Weetwood cairn.*



Plate 9. Possible cist quarry site, North Plantation.

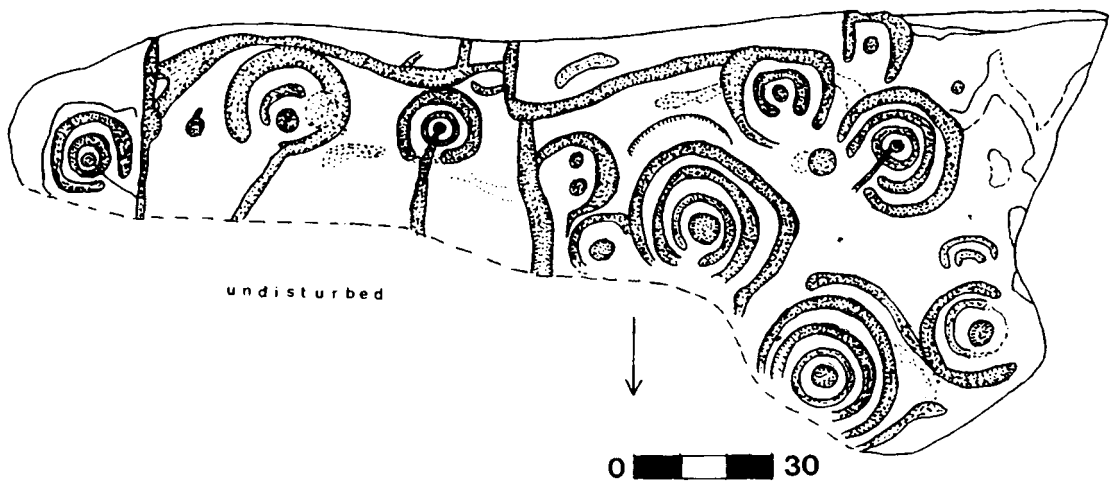


Fig. 6. The decorated floor of the Ketley Crag rock shelter.

(H00521, NU 0207 2784: plate 9) and at **Gayles Moor, Richmondshire** (Beckensall & Laurie, forthcoming) have had slabs removed and the base of the removed area has had fresh motifs pecked into the rock. The most likely reason for the removal of these slabs is for their incorporation within monuments, perhaps as cist slabs, and the North Plantation example suggests a time lapse that enabled the rock surface from which the slab was removed to have eroded before the new pristine motifs were added.

## Ceremonial monuments and decorated standing stones

What is the true relationship between **Long Meg** and her Daughters? The red sandstone slab, covered with motifs, stands at the portal of the porphyrite stone circle, and no chronological relationship between the stone, the motifs and the circle has yet been established, although it must be highly likely that Long Meg was quarried from an already decorated outcrop (Frodsham 1996, 111). The **Castlerigg** spiral (Frodsham 1996, 113) has become notoriously difficult to see, and some doubt has been cast on its very existence. However, it has been recorded on two separate occasions by its original discoverers (Nick Best & Neil Stevenson, pers. comm.) and has recently been clearly seen by others (Debbie Anderson, pers. comm.). It seems as though the motif only reveals itself on very rare occasions (a fact which accounts for its not having been discovered previously) and those of us not fortunate enough to see it for ourselves will have to rely on the photographic evidence.

The specific locations of rock art within certain monuments, both in Cumbria and in Scotland, suggest that the decoration may have been integral to the original design of these monuments, which are undoubtedly Neolithic in origin. However, it remains possible, although doubtful, that some or all of this decoration could have been added in the Bronze Age.

A single cup-marked stone was recovered from the base of a large pit which had apparently been dug into the interior of the **Milfield South** henge (NT 939335) during the early Bronze Age. Its excavator notes that 'the original function of this pit may have been funerary, but there is no evidence from finds or soil analysis to support such a view. Its later purpose was apparently to hold a large post, and the stone setting with cup-marked stone may have been intended as some sort of foundation deposit' (Harding 1981, 97). Although the actual production of this particular cup-mark remains undated, the site does appear to represent another example of the deposition of a cup-mark (but nothing more elaborate) in an early Bronze Age context.

**The Goatstones**, Northumberland (H00766. NY8293 7471) is a 'four poster', all four stones having cupmarks, surrounding what was allegedly a burial; a site generally regarded as early Bronze Age. Marked stones that stand above the surface in any monument always pose the question of when were the motifs added, but it is most unlikely that the cupmarks could pre-date the monument in this case. The Goatstones are therefore prime contenders for Bronze Age rock art, but note that no complex motifs are present.

There are a few isolated standing stones decorated with cupmarks (Beckensall 1992, 1992a), eg **Matfen** (H00744, NZ.032705), the **Warrior Stone**, Ingoe (H00756, NZ.044747), **Swinburn** (H00768, NY 939746) in Northumberland, and on the other side of the country at **Kirksanton**, Cumbria (H01109, SD 136811). Unfortunately, these monuments are very poorly understood and whilst they and/or the motifs on them could date from the Bronze Age, there is no evidence to confirm this.

## Decorated rock shelters

Five examples of decorated rock shelters exist, or have existed, in Northumberland: at Goatscrag, Corby's Crag, Ketley Crag, Cuddy's Cave, and (now destroyed) Cartington Cove.

Goatscrag and Corby's Crag have been excavated using modern methods. It is unlikely that the floor of Ketley Crag will reveal much more, but it remains unexcavated. **Cartington Cove** (approx. NU 044091), where cups and rings were reported, was blown up by quarrying, and the motifs recorded at Cuddy's Cave are no longer visible.

The **Goatscrag** shelters (NT 997370), facing south, are part of a Fell Sandstone ridge, Broomridge, that overlooks the valley of the Broomridgedean Burn, a tributary of the Till, which it joins on the Milfield Plain, and overlook Roughting Linn. The ridge has three marked rocks before it reaches Goatscrag, where there is a cluster of ten linked cups, like horseshoes, and two other cups on the top of the rock that contains the shelters. Burgess excavated two rock shelters, and on the vertical inner wall of the more westerly are four animals impacted into the rock. One has movement in its bent legs, and the others are static. The zoomorphic figures cannot be dated, they are unique in northern England, and may be prehistoric. Mesolithic flints were found on the floors, but the main period of use was early Bronze Age (Burgess 1972). The rock art was discovered by van Hoek over ten years after the excavation (van Hoek & Smith 1988). The area of the ridge and rock shelters was of importance to different groups in prehistory, but it is impossible to link definitely the rock art with early Bronze Age use of the shelters.

The excavation of a rock shelter at **Corby's Crag** (Beckensall 1976) at NU 1280 0965 revealed a wide range of finds buried in the rock shelter floor, from Mesolithic material to a modern teacup and penknife, but the main use to which the floor had been put was for the burial of an inverted enlarged food vessel filled with cremated human bone under a triangular-shaped piece of stone. On the floor of the shelter, pecked into the natural rock surface, was a small groove curving towards the buried vessel. The tooling contrasted with the later iron pick marks when a seat and ledges had been made at one end of the overhang for the comfort of bell-pit miners or shepherds. None of this had disturbed the burial. Above, on the dome of rock which has a dominant viewpoint across the valley to the Cheviots, is a large basin and groove leading from its centre. The dome was also the dividing line between two major landowners, whose initials are carved in the sandstone opposite each other, and by steps cut into the rock. The site also has a standing stone at its entrance and overlooks a bivallate Iron Age enclosure. Again, it is



impossible to prove an unassailable case for linking rock art with the burial, but the groove cut in the floor is a convincing association.

**Ketley Crag** rock shelter (HOO553. NU07432978: fig. 6) has a floor covered with cup and ring markings under a shallow soil that has been disturbed by burrowing animals: there does not appear much chance of excavation revealing anything more here. The shelter is one of a number of prominent outcrops overlooking a fertile valley, with views of several kilometres. The site is close to outcrop rock art, some of it of very high quality, and to a hilltop enclosure and a small platform settlement, but there is nothing to make any definite association.

Mention must be made of another site, at **Cuddy's Cave**, Doddington (NU 0036 3103), for it was reported last century (Robson 1873-75) that the pavement rock had seven cups, 'four in a quadrangle and four in a line from these'. No one has seen them since. Prior to this, Tate (1863-68) left an account and drawings: a cup and ring, cup, ring, a second interrupted ring from which curved grooves extend, a cup and three concentric rings, and a cup and two concentric rings. The site attracted other carvings, possibly medieval, and the name associates the cave there with Cuthbert. All this shows how difficult it is to put rock art into firm chronological context, as landscape features such as caves and rock shelters were put to differing uses over many millennia. A decorated rock shelter may have provided an attractive location for Bronze Age burials (as did a variety of Neolithic monuments throughout the country) but we are unable to say with any certainty what the significance of the decoration may have been to those attending the burials.

## DISCUSSION

Not many years ago most, if not all, of northern England's prehistoric rock art was generally assumed to be Bronze Age in origin. Taken together, the circumstantial evidence linking Bronze Age burials with rock art (eg. cist slabs from monuments containing Bronze Age pots, and Bronze Age burials in decorated rock shelters) may be interpreted as support for such an argument, but as yet we do not have even a single unambiguous example of a Bronze Age cup-and-ring mark. More recent accounts have sought to impose an entirely Neolithic context for all open air rock art, but have allowed for the re-use of already ancient marked surfaces in early Bronze Age funerary contexts. There are, indeed, a few sites at which re-use may reasonably be suggested, but not one such case can be regarded as proven. In addition there are several early Bronze Age cairns in areas immediately adjacent to, or directly on top of, outcrops decorated with typical cup-and-ring marks, suggesting either that the decoration is Bronze Age or that the cairn builders continued to respect the decorated outcrops as special places without necessarily understanding or appreciating the old rock art. The art at all of these sites cannot post-date the early Bronze Age, but may pre-date it by several centuries.

What has not been discussed in print previously, but which potentially has a major bearing on the question of Bronze Age rock art, is the fact that several cases do exist

where decorated cist slabs have almost certainly been produced specially for the monuments in which they were discovered. In his discussion of re-use, Bradley (1992, 171) quotes the example of Knappers near Glasgow as a possible exception to prove the rule. In fact, a number of similar examples from northern England, taken together, suggest that this rule may require some amendment. Some of these examples were discovered many years ago and we have to rely on antiquarian descriptions for their interpretation, but the recently discovered example at Witton Gilbert proves beyond any reasonable doubt that cup and ring marks were produced specially for cist slabs. Frustratingly, what remains unresolved at the time of writing is the date of the Witton Gilbert slab, although it is hoped to obtain a radiocarbon date for the building of the cist within the next few months and this should effectively provide the first clear evidence for the chronology of rock art production in northern England. By analogy, it will then be reasonable to assume that the examples from Gainsford and Redhills, amongst others, are of a similar date and part of the same general tradition. While these sites may turn out to be Bronze Age, we would predict at this stage that they are unlikely to be any later than very early Bronze Age and may well be earlier still. Bradley's observation that the only artefact from the cist at Knappers was a 'flint adze of Neolithic date' (ibid, 171) serves to remind us that not all cist burials need be Bronze Age.

As the motifs used in rock art were clearly so important, and complex, to the people who made and used them, it should not come as a surprise that we are unable to offer a simple, all-encompassing explanation of their history, especially as our starting point encompasses no real understanding of their original meaning or function. In his recent discussion of the possible meaning and significance of the spiral in prehistoric rock art, one of the writers ventured to suggest an interpretation of the basic symbolism of the spiral and it may be that a very similar idea could underlie the use of the cup-and-ring motif (Frodsham 1996, 132-135). It is suggested that both motifs may represent a cosmology based on the concept of life as a journey to or from a central place, which could perhaps be thought of as the domain of the ancestors, the beginning of time or any number of other possibilities. Life is therefore seen as a journey to or from something much more significant or important. Could it therefore be that such a symbolism was irrelevant to, and perhaps hopelessly incompatible with, the basic cosmology of the Bronze Age which necessitated the interment of important individuals in single graves? Regardless of this, however, it is reasonable to ask why the incorporation of ancient and symbolically-charged rock art should have occurred at a few early Bronze Age sites when hundreds of similar, undecorated sites exist throughout the region. Could it be that the few known examples of rock art from probable early Bronze Age burials represent the last vestiges of a belief system which, at a time of change and quite probably of crisis in many ways, still recognised the power of the old symbolism, much as some early Anglo-Saxon burials are clearly Christian but still hang onto some old pagan traditions?

One of the traditions that may have occurred in the Bronze Age was the incorporation of a large number of single cup-marks within the structure of burial monuments, either on

the upper side of a capstone or on small 'mobiliary stones' placed within the structure of a cairn. This could occur at sites which also incorporate more complex rock art. One explanation of this phenomenon is that these cupmarks were produced by mourners at the funeral ceremony and offered to the deceased, just as today we place flowers on a grave. Of course, it may have been the *act* of producing the cup-mark that was important rather than the resulting cup-marked stone, but whatever the explanation, the fact that the phenomenon occurs at so few sites suggests that it may not have lasted long into the Bronze Age.

To sum up, the available evidence suggests that the use of rock art in demonstrably Bronze Age contexts throughout northern England is almost negligible, although it is also true that very few firm Neolithic contexts have been suggested. On balance we would favour a Neolithic date for most if not all of our 'complex' rock art. Most of this rock art was executed on natural rock outcrops, but some now appears in possibly secondary contexts within monuments. However, some was created specifically for monuments, including burial monuments (eg Lilburn) during the Neolithic. Some such decorated monuments may be Bronze Age, and some of these may include specially made rock art while others may incorporate fragments of older decorated rock. The Goatstones four-poster and the pit in the Milfield South henge are the only clearly Bronze Age structures which display decoration throughout the region under consideration here, and it is important to note that only simple cup-marks are present at both.

What is beyond doubt is that the practice of decorating rocks in the open landscape eventually fell out of favour. This may have occurred gradually or quite abruptly, but must have been related to other changes in society. It may have occurred towards the middle of the Bronze Age, as part of the process whereby an 'agricultural landscape' replaced the 'ritual landscape' of earlier prehistory (Bradley 1998, chptr 10; Frodsham, forthcoming). Alternatively, it may have occurred much earlier in association with the breaking up of decorated surfaces to provide cist slabs (although it is equally feasible that such cist slabs were being produced while rock art production in the open landscape was still being widely practised). A further complication is that some cup-and-ring art was apparently produced specifically for funerary monuments. Perhaps we are searching for patterns in the use of rock art which never existed at the national level: given the complexity and probable longevity of the cup-and-ring tradition it may well be that we will never be able to identify simple trends such as the move from Neolithic open air rock art to Bronze Age art in graves. It is perhaps more likely that the construction, destruction and re-use of rock art has been continuous (if sporadic) from the early Neolithic through until the Bronze Age. Whilst accepting that the re-use of decorated outcrop rock undoubtedly occurred at a handful of Scottish cists, this trend has not been proved in Galloway or in Northumberland, two areas in which it might perhaps have been expected given the numbers of open air rock art sites and excavated early Bronze Age burials in both.

For now, we should concentrate on the identification of broad trends at a regional level, after which we may be able to contrast the changing uses of rock art between various

regions through time. The forthcoming date for the Witton Gilbert cist should provide a crucial piece of evidence relating to the chronology of rock art, but rather than be treated as an end in itself this should provide further impetus for a carefully planned programme of fieldwork to investigate the Neolithic and early Bronze Age of northern England, in which rock art must be seen to play a fundamental role alongside the more traditional modes of enquiry.

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