

Lord of the Cups and Rings: the Beckensall Trilogy

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This paper is an extended book review covering three recent publications by Stan Beckensall:

British Prehistoric Rock Art. Tempus Publishing Limited, 1999. ISBN 07524 1471 2.

Prehistoric Rock Art in Northumberland. Tempus Publishing Limited, 2001. ISBN 0 7524 1945 5.

Prehistoric Rock Art in Cumbria: Landscapes and Monuments. Tempus Publishing Limited, 2002. ISBN 0 7524 2526 9.

INTRODUCTION

About ten years ago I recall sitting in Stan Beckensall's study and telling him that he must find a publisher with whom he could work to produce an attractive volume which outlined for the benefit of a general audience the vast amount of work he has undertaken over the years. Since then, Stan has produced numerous publications which are of general interest as well as being of considerable value to professional archaeologists. The decades of personal research work, which underpin these publications, have been undertaken by Stan on an entirely amateur basis. Free from the ties of professional archaeological duties, he has pursued his goal of discovering and recording rock art with daunting vigour, necessitating many cold, wet and windy days on the wild hills of Northumberland, Cumbria and

elsewhere. He has also done much to publicise rock art and local prehistory, delivering countless well-attended public lectures over the decades. For many years, there was little professional interest in his work, but fortunately this has now changed and rock art is becoming an established and respectable subject for study within our universities.

The Reviews

The three books reviewed here are all published by Tempus as part of their current and highly successful archaeological range. I will review them in the order in which they appeared, starting with **British Prehistoric Rock Art**. This book actually contains little that is not available elsewhere, but it is an invaluable introduction to the subject that is sure to become a standard text on many undergraduate reading lists as

well as being of interest to the general reader.

The book contains a useful introduction to the motifs used in rock art, and to the history of rock art studies. A small criticism here. Stan includes a brief discussion of the spiral in prehistoric rock art that might tempt some readers to explore this particular subject further. It is unfortunate that he omits to include any reference here to my own paper on the spiral in prehistoric rock art (*Northern Archaeology vol 13/14*) which was clearly used as a source for this section. (At a more general level, there are inconsistencies in the referencing throughout the volume which could have been easily rectified by a little careful proof reading). The chapter on the history of rock art studies is sound, but could I feel have examined some of the antiquarian sources in greater detail. The thoughts of George Tate in the 1860s, for example, do not differ in many essential respects from those of scholars such as Richard Bradley nearly 150 years later.

The section entitled 'Art in the landscape' provides a useful overview of open-air rock art found in many regions of Britain. I have a problem with this section in that it also includes descriptions of many examples of rock art from monuments (e.g. Orkney, SW England and Wales) that should surely have been left for the following chapter entitled 'Rock Art in context'. Given this inconsistency, the lack of reference to the Cumbrian sites in the former chapter could legitimately be brought into question. Part of the answer lies in the acknowledgements section at the end of the volume, where the discovery of two important new Cumbrian examples is recorded. Perhaps this desire to distinguish between 'art in the landscape' and 'art

in context' is generating a problem that need not exist in the first place. Having read the book, I would suggest that more complete regional accounts, with examples of art in monuments and on naturally occurring rock faces discussed side by side, might have been more appropriate. Nevertheless, the chapter will be of use to any student unfamiliar with the general distribution of British rock art.

The 'Rock Art in context' chapter includes references to several critical sites which have something to offer the student attempting to unravel the mysteries of rock art chronology, and perhaps even some clues as to the changing meaning and purpose of rock art throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age. Stan's text on 'Standing stones and circles of stone' jumps about a bit, from the Lake District to northern Scotland to Stonehenge to Brittany, but all the sites discussed are important. The section entitled 'Burial Monuments' is perhaps the most intriguing bit of the book. I collaborated with Stan on a recent publication (*Northern Archaeology vol 15/16*) looking into the evidence for Bronze Age use (or re-use) of rock art, and the conclusions from careful consideration of all the available evidence were, it has to be said, inconclusive (this paper is considered further in the next review). The recently excavated Fulforth Farm (Witton Gilbert) site is crucial, but even the results from here can be interpreted in different ways. Stan's own investigations at Weetwood and Fowberry are also very important, not least because they demonstrate intriguing relationships between open-air rock art and art in monuments. I suspect that definitive conclusions relating to the use of rock art in burial monuments must await further projects like that at Fulforth Farm, and we

shouldn't always be seeking to extrapolate general patterns from specific sites: while general patterns may emerge, it would come as no surprise if people were doing different things with rock art in different places at different times.

The occurrence of rock art at natural rock shelters is also intriguing, but again a satisfactory explanation must await further fieldwork. The final section on 'House sites' warrants only a single paragraph, which is a pity because if cupmarked stones were being consciously incorporated into the structure of Bronze Age or later houses then this gives a completely new avenue of enquiry into the purpose of cupmarks at this time. Perhaps the greatest omission from the 'Rock Art in context' chapter is a summary section attempting to make some sense of the various sites discussed. Or perhaps Stan is deliberately leaving such interpretations to the whim of the reader.

This book ends with a hopeful reference to the English Heritage/Bournemouth University Rock Art Pilot Project, which Stan hopes will bring rock art to a wider audience and lead to better conservation of fragile rock art sites. Regrettably, it has to be said that despite the production of a hefty report, little if anything has happened as a result of this exercise. The vast resources brought to the subject by English Heritage have had but a minor impact when compared to Stan's huge, and wholly unresourced, contribution.

The second book reviewed here is **Prehistoric Rock Art in Northumberland**. Here, Stan is on home territory, and it shows. He is more familiar with this corpus of sites than any other person has ever been, or

is ever likely to be. People in the Neolithic may have understood what the motifs were all about, but no Neolithic man ever saw all the Northumbrian sites that Stan has studied, never mind those further afield!

The book adopts a similar framework to that in *British Prehistoric Rock Art*, with a general introduction followed by chapters on 'Art in the landscape' and 'Art in monuments'. A section entitled 'Portable and reused stone' is also included, as are an all too brief two page summary ('What do we make of all this?') and a final section entitled 'The future'. 'Art in the Landscape' is by far the largest chapter, occupying well over a hundred pages. It consists of a detailed inventory and discussion of decorated outcrops and naturally deposited boulders in the county. (Much of the material has been published before, though not in as presentable a form as here). In this respect, it is perhaps more of reference work than a chapter to be read from start to end. A reference work should, of course, refer to its sources, and the observation regarding spirals made in the above review is no less valid to the discussion on p. 111 of this volume. My only real criticism is that Stan has only included a single page summary, and only a few lines of speculation as to the function of this open air art, when a summary and explanation are precisely what many readers will be looking for.

In his chapter on 'Art in monuments', Stan refers to a paper he co-wrote with me entitled 'Questions of chronology – the case for Bronze Age rock art' (*Northern Archaeology* vol 15/16). This paper analysed every known case of rock art from contexts which may have been Bronze Age, and in not one single case could a Bronze Age date

for the art be proved. Either the context was not securely dated, or the art may have been reused from an earlier context. Personally, I believe that the vast majority of cup and ring and associated motifs are Neolithic (though I would not as yet like to be drawn on exactly when in the Neolithic they first appeared, nor when their production ceased). I think it probable that the production of simple cup marks extended into the early Bronze Age, but that even this was not widespread by this time. It is unfortunate, in my view, that Stan, with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject, does not allow himself a little more speculation here as to the chronology and purpose of 'art in monuments'.

The 'Portable and re-used stone' chapter lacks either an introduction or a summary, which renders it little more than a descriptive list of discoveries for which a place could not be found in either of the preceding chapters. This is a shame as a number of interesting suggestions could have been made regarding the various examples described here. The reference to 'Peter Tipping' on p.167 is unfortunate: the work referred to is that of Richard Tipping, and this stone has been discussed in print by both the author and Peter Topping. The possibility of buried Neolithic land surfaces and occupation sites surviving beneath the Powburn gravel is very important, and it was the discovery of the 'Powburn boulder', coupled with Richard Tipping's dating of the overlying gravels, that led directly to this suggestion.

There is little point in analysing the content of this book in detail: quite simply Stan Beckensall is the only man in the world who could have written it, and it represents a labour of love over some three decades. Those who wish

to pick at small inconsistencies in his presentation may do so, but I have nothing but praise for the sheer determination and hard work that Stan has shown over the years, often, it has to be said, with a shoddy degree of assistance from those in authority. In his final paragraph Stan observes that 'people enjoy rock art'. This is certainly true, and many people will now have the opportunity to enjoy it even more as a result of this book.

The third volume of the 'trilogy' is **Prehistoric Rock Art in Cumbria: Landscapes and Monuments**. This is in many ways the most satisfying of the three volumes, largely because greater attention is paid to individual sites due to their relative scarcity in this part of the country, but also because Stan at last allows himself a little speculation as to the original meaning and purpose of the art. The illustrations in this book are particularly good, and I would like to praise in particular the haunting illustration of Long Meg by Gordon Highmoor (colour plate 29). The prehistoric heritage of northern England has much to offer the artist, as well as the archaeologist.

Much of this book would have been impossible to write just a few years ago, as so many of the sites discussed have only been recognised within recent years. Back in 1989 I published a paper in the *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* in which I observed that the lack of rock art in Cumbria compared to areas to north and east was surprising and required explanation, though I was unable to offer anything approaching a satisfactory explanation. This is not a paper of which I am particularly proud, but it did describe all known rock art sites in Cumbria at

that time, making it quite an important element in the history of rock art studies in the County.

After a useful introductory chapter, this book adopts a similar structure to the other two, considering art on naturally occurring rock outcrops and boulders before moving on to rock art on various forms of monument. The Chapel Stile, Langdale, boulder is extraordinary, and the fact that the art here remained undetected in such a popular area for so long is in itself amazing. It has been suggested to me that it might be a modern forgery, but there seems little reason to believe that it is anything but genuine, and it may well be linked in some way with activity at the axe quarries in the surrounding uplands. The recently discovered Patterdale sites are also fascinating, appearing to represent a local style within the wider cup and ring tradition.

The Long Meg stone circle remains an awe-inspiring site, magnificent yet intimate at one and the same time. It remains off the beaten track, and fortunately survives without any of the gaudy interpretative panels that interpreters seem to delight in plastering all over our ancient monuments these days. Long Meg also provides a tantalising opportunity for a fieldwork project which could tell us much about the local Neolithic, including, possibly, some major clues regarding the origin of rock art in the region. I am convinced that Long Meg herself was quarried from an already decorated outcrop, almost certainly from the red sandstone river cliffs above the nearby River Eden. Similar decoration still survives on red sandstone cliffs at Morwick in Northumberland and Hawthornden near Edinburgh, and the Calderstones in Liverpool may have been quarried

from a similar site on the Mersey (a discussion of Neolithic spirals on red stone can be found in my paper in *Northern Archaeology* vol 13/14). If the buried portion of the decorated face of Long Meg is excavated and found to contain motifs fresher than those on its exposed section then, as far as I am concerned, this theory will be proved. The recent recognition of spiral decoration on at least one other stone at Long Meg may reduce the appeal of this theory to some, but not to me. Rather, the exciting recognition of these new symbols serves to remind me, as it should remind all of us, that much more rock art must still await discovery in Cumbria.

The next site considered by Stan is Castlerigg, more dramatically located than Long Meg but now, unfortunately, something of a tourist trap, at least during the summer months. Being such a tourist attraction, the site is regularly visited by archaeologists, 'mystics', and ordinary people. It is probably the most photographed prehistoric monument in the whole of northern England. Despite this popularity, this splendid circle held onto one of its most fascinating secrets right through until 1995, when a large spiral was recorded on one of its stones. When first told about the discovery I was convinced that the students concerned had simply mixed up the name of the site with that of Long Meg, but I was soon shown a photograph and found myself well and truly corrected.

In general, I have every confidence in Stan's ability to accurately record rock art sites through his tried and tested rubbing method. (On one memorable occasion, when, following an excursion to Anglesey, Stan had virtually recreated the interior of the Barclodiad y Gawres passage tomb in his study by draping rubbings over

various pieces of furniture, I was able to point out to him a spiral on one of rubbings that he hadn't even noticed while doing the rubbing in the darkness of the tomb!). However (and I know he won't thank me for saying this) I can't help but have some concerns over his rubbing of the Castlerigg spiral. In 1996, with the full blessing of its discoverers, I was actually the first person to publish this particular spiral (*Northern Archaeology* vol 13/14: Stan makes no mention of this publication, which also discussed Long Meg at some length) but I have always had a nagging doubt about its authenticity. I recall the first time I showed a photograph of it to Richard Bradley: several seconds of stunned silence were followed by the considered exclamation 'Bloody hell!'. In many ways there is no reason to doubt its existence, but the sheer impossibility of seeing or feeling it still leaves me with a nagging doubt that we could possibly be seeing in the photographs the remnants of a modern motif, perhaps marked onto the rock with wax during some late night gathering of a local clan (I have seen such markings, sometimes together with offerings of flowers, vegetables and assorted other 'gifts to the gods' at several other stone circles over the years). However, I want to believe that it's real, so, for the time being at least, I will. The suggestion of other motifs on other stones certainly lends support to its case.

The 'Burial contexts' chapter includes discussions of a number of fascinating sites, including some recently discovered ones which demonstrate that many more must surely still await discovery. The Old Parks site is of particular personal interest, as it was me who rediscovered the 'lost' carved stones. I recall knocking on the farmhouse door one cold winter's day

nearly 20 years ago, and asking whether anyone knew anything about them. I was invited to search in a small wood round the back of the farmhouse where a lady in the house 'vaguely remembered having seen them many, many years before'. And there they were! I am delighted that, following much negotiation, they are now safely within Tullie House. Hopefully, the missing stone will also turn up one day, but the odds must be against that – we should be grateful that any of them survived nearly a century lying around on the farm. These motifs on these stones appear rather crude when compared to much rock art, but it may well be that they only survived through being buried within the cairn: perhaps such crude markings also existed at numerous open air sites but have now completely eroded away.

'*Standing stones and others in south Cumbria*' is a long title for a chapter that only includes discussion of three sites. The Shap Avenue must have been an extraordinary site until it was destroyed for building stone: it would be nice to think that its line might be marked in some way in future (it may be possible to relocate the stone holes through careful geophysical survey). The Giant's Grave (Kirksanton) is a beautiful, elegant site, but unfortunately there is little we can say about the cupmarks here except to point out that as cupmarks exist on both faces of the stones, they cannot all have been made before the stone was quarried (i.e. the cupmarks were not all made on natural outcrops, later quarried and erected, as has been suggested for other sites such as Long Meg). This is not an unimportant observation when we have so little to go on with regard to the chronology of cupmarks. However, given that we have no date for the monument itself, it is not a point worth labouring.

Four sites are grouped together within the chapter entitled '*Other sites*'. One of these is a probable 'polissoir' (used for polishing stone axes) in south west Cumbria, and one is a beautiful cup and ring marked boulder which sits in splendid isolation near North Stainmoor, nearly 10 miles from its known nearest 'neighbours' in County Durham. The other two are later prehistoric settlements. The occurrence of cupmarks within roundhouses is touched upon in the first book reviewed above, but here we apparently have the incorporation of cupmarked boulders into Iron Age or Romano-British field walls. This is fascinating. Perhaps it gives weight to the suggestion that fields and fieldwalls may have been considered in part as ritual monuments during later prehistory. At the very least, archaeologists studying later prehistoric settlements and fields should now keep their eyes open for cupmarks, and if some are found then they shouldn't necessarily be simply dismissed as background noise from earlier times.

A few splendid stones are discussed in the chapter entitled '*Portables*', but without known contexts there is little than we can realistically hope to learn from these. The Honey Potts Farm stone, now on display at Tullie House Museum, is perhaps the single finest specimen of cup and ring art from Cumbria, and its very existence surely implies that much more similar quality art must at one time have existed in the region: let us hope that some of this will one day be rediscovered.

We now arrive at '*Endpiece*', Stan's final chapter. I have criticised Stan above for not allowing himself much speculation regarding rock art, but here he does provide a very interesting

discussion, including some of his own poetry, noting that he saves his feelings for his poetry. Some readers may consider this something of a cop-out, but it is perhaps better that Stan leaves unanswerable questions unanswered than allow himself to be drawn into the 'depressing' speculation of other experts such as that of Professor Anati which he cites.

Unusually for a final chapter, much of it is given over to an invited contribution. This is by Gordon Highmoor, who considers the case for rock art actually being 'art'. This is on a different intellectual level from most of the rest of the book, and may be lost on some readers, but it is important. We all use the term 'rock art' without really thinking what is implied by the word 'art'. Gordon's use of the term 'primitive people' is unfortunate, as I would never use this term to describe people capable of the magnificent architecture that we see in our megalithic tombs and stone circles. I also disagree fundamentally with his observation that 'where hunting man had visualised everything in terms of his immediate physical needs, the more settled herder-farmer projected himself beyond the everyday and came to see the world as physical and spiritual'. This does a gross disservice to the spiritual life of our Mesolithic and Palaeolithic ancestors, who certainly had a greater sense of the spiritual than most of us do today. That aside, Gordon's contribution is fascinating, although personally I have no doubt that his greatest contribution to the book is the aforementioned colour plate 29.

Stan's observations on 'The future' are important, and don't just apply to Cumbria. The time for grand words and expensively commissioned but ineffective reports is now over. Those

in power in northern England must now seek to build on Stan's splendid work by developing and instituting workable policies aimed at the conservation and interpretation of our rock art heritage. This will not be easy, but it must be done, and it must be done soon.

SUMMARY

The purpose of a review is to provide an honest and accurate summary of publications for those who may be interested in reading the volumes under discussion. In attempting to be accurate, I have been critical of some things, and I may have been overcritical of the lack of referencing in what are, principally, books aimed at the popular market. A further general criticism could be that all three books suffer to an extent through attempting to provide detailed catalogues while trying to appeal to the general reader. However, these criticisms must not be allowed to taint the magnificent contribution to prehistoric studies which Stan's contribution undoubtedly is. Anyone seeking to gain an understanding of what we know, and what we don't know, about prehistoric rock art in Northern England (and elsewhere) could do a great deal worse than to sit down for a few hours with these three volumes. (I should add that Stan's 1998 volume, co-written with Tim Laurie, on Prehistoric Rock Art of County Durham, Swaledale and Wensleydale [published by Durham County Council] should not be overlooked, although it does not form part of this review). The bibliographies contained within all the books will send the real rock art convert off to consult many more relevant sources, many of them (surprise, surprise) by Stan himself. Other readers will be

content to study the beautiful artwork and photographs, and excellent line drawings, within all three books, and not worry too much about what it all 'means'. The more I study rock art, the more I wonder whether I shouldn't have adopted the latter policy myself many years ago.

Finally, as a professional archaeologist working in northern England I don't mind putting on record that I am extremely envious of Stan's ability to find the time to write so many books about local archaeology in so short a period of time. One day I hope to put some of my own thoughts on rock art and related matters down on paper. That is assuming, of course, that Stan won't by then have already published every conceivable thought it is possible to have about the subject, and I wouldn't put that past him!



Plate 1. Stan Beckensall in action