

# A PAIR OF MERELS BOARDS ON A STONE BLOCK FROM CHURCH HOLE CAVE, CRESWELL CRAGS, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE, ENGLAND

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this short paper is to bring to wider notice the significant and exciting find of a double merels or nine men's morris board from new excavations at Church Hole Cave, Creswell Crags (Nottinghamshire, SK535743). The excavations are ongoing and an interim statement on the Palaeolithic archaeology from the first three years (2006–8) is in preparation and will follow in the *Transactions*. As this will largely concentrate on the Paleolithic deposits from the Cave the opportunity is taken here to publish this significant medieval find separately, both as a fine example of its type and as offering a clear insight into the later use of the Cave.

## THE BOARD

The block measures approximately 270x225mm in maximum dimensions (see Figs. 1 and 2). Filling most of the worked face is a pair of merels boards, incised deeply one inside the other. The larger (outer) board comprises an arrangement of three concentric rectangles, each side of triple lines cut by a vertical line across their middles. The maximum size of the design is 135x150mm. The space defined by the inner rectangle of the outer board is mostly occupied by a smaller, squarer version of this design, set at a slight angle to the outer board. The maximum size of the inner board is 49.5x49.5mm. The only other markings apparent are several deeper cuts or incisions: two top-right of the block, one raking the lower-left side of the board, one raking the bottom left of the board and a fourth raking the lower right-side of the space between the

inner and outer boards. These marks have the character and random lay-out of plough strikes or bald sharpening marks. Given the location of the find (see below) – on the scree slope outside the cave mouth – it is unlikely that the marks were created by ploughs, unless of course the object had a complex mobility around the area. On the grounds of parsimony we suggest that these are more likely to be sharpening marks.

## THE SITE CONTEXT (Fig. 3)

The caves of Creswell Crags – Pin Hole, Robin Hood Cave, and Mother Grundy's Parlour on the north (Derbyshire) side, and Church Hole on the south (Nottinghamshire) side – form the richest dataset for the archaeology of the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic in Britain, as well as a rich resource for Pleistocene palaeontology including ample evidence of hyaena denning. They were effectively cleared of their abundant deposits during various excavations in two main periods, the 1870/80s and the 1920/30s, with smaller campaigns subsequent to these. The excavations were rapid, poor in quality relative to modern methods, and publication was sparse. Many finds, it would appear, have been lost, and those which are extant have been dispersed to at least 13 museums.

Despite the relatively poor quality of the early excavations, the abundance of Pleistocene material, particularly from the Late Palaeolithic, established Creswell as the UK's primary Upper Palaeolithic resource, and Dorothy Garrod, in her survey of the British Upper Palaeolithic, coined the term 'Creswellian' for the archaeology of the first half of



FIGURE 1: The merels board lying amidst natural limestone boulders on the talus slope outside Church Hole cave.  
Photo: P. Pettitt.

the Lateglacial Interstadial (13–12,000  $^{14}\text{C}$  BP, known on the continent as the Magdalenian) (Garrod 1926). This status was enhanced in 2003 with the discovery of 13 engravings of Late Upper Palaeolithic antiquity, Britain's only known examples of cave art (e.g. Pettitt et al. 2007). Despite this importance, virtually nothing is known of the use of the gorge between the Late Pleistocene and the eighteenth century, when it attracted the artist George Stubbs, who painted a series of works with Creswell as a backdrop, most famously *Two Gentlemen going a shooting, with a view of Creswell Crags, taken on the spot*, painted c.1767, which shows a mill at the west end of the gorge. Early excavators can be forgiven for concentrating on

Pleistocene remains, although a few pieces illustrated in excavation reports show that the caves contained archaeology at least from the Neolithic, Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Romano-British and early medieval periods, and it becomes more abundant following the foundation of Welbeck Abbey by Thomas de Cuckney in 1140 (Wall 2008).

New excavations directly outside Church Hole cave directed by Paul Pettitt commenced in 2006, the object of which is to investigate part of the spoil heap from the excavations which emptied the cave of its sediments in 1875 and (mainly) 1876; *in situ* talus deposits containing ceramics and metalwork of the post-medieval, medieval and pre-medieval

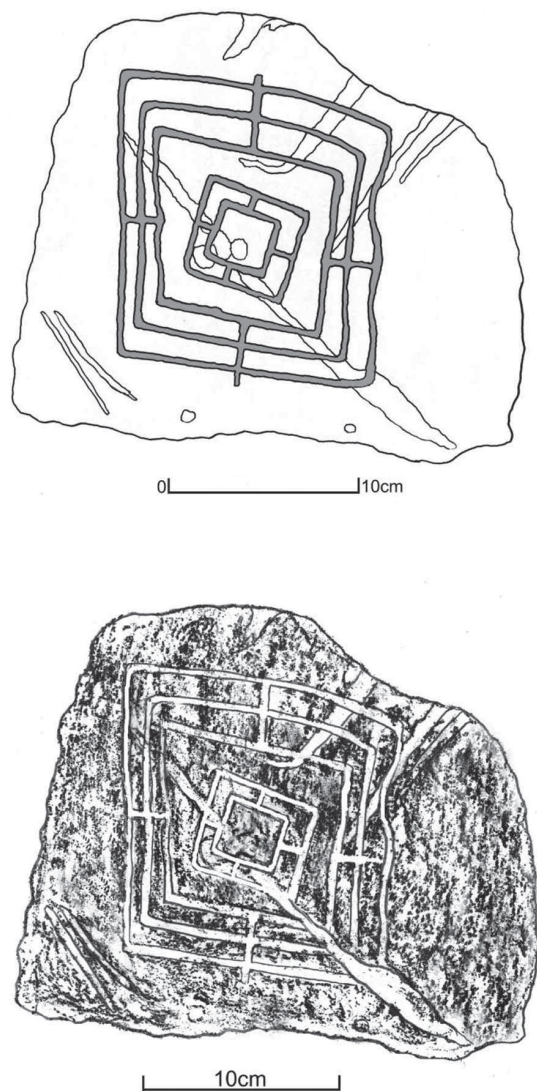


FIGURE 2: The merels boards. Drawing by Paul Brown and courtesy English Heritage.

periods, and underlying *in situ* Pleistocene deposits known from the 2008 season to contain intact Late Upper Palaeolithic archaeology. Among a variety of objects of Palaeolithic to Victorian age recovered from the spoil heap were two silver pennies of Henry I (kindly identified by Dr R. M. Jacobi at The British Museum), of interest as the original excavations recovered a third penny, also of Henry I, from inside the cave, now curated at Manchester

Museum (Dawkins 1877). The *in situ* deposits underlying the spoil heap and stratified to its south (against the cliff) contained a range of Medieval ceramics dominated by brown-glazed earthenwares and Derbyshire purpleware. Among these, and in an area in which limestone blocks appear to have been dumped (perhaps from clearing space in the cave), was found the limestone block bearing two incised merels boards. Unfortunately, the nature of the external Holocene deposits, which are quite mixed due to colluviation and periodic clearances of material from within the cave, the stratigraphic relationship between the medieval and post-medieval ceramics is not secure. Similarly, the fact that the three coins of Henry I were found within the cave provides no certainty as to the age of the board. They do, however, suggest an intriguing speculation. Certainly they indicate intense activity and significant monetary wealth in the early to mid 12th century (if we can be confident they were not much later losses, which seems unlikely). One possible explanation for their presence could be that the Caves were used by outlaws and brigands, allowing us to interpret the coins as part of their ill-gotten gains. If the board was contemporary with the pennies it might then indicate the outlaws playing board games and no doubt gambling on the outcome (see comments below on dicing). To speculate the other way, if the boards' association was with the 15th or 16th century pottery it might support the idea of the leisure pursuit of shepherds or stockmen using the cave system. In reality the present evidence only allows us to conclude that the cave clearly saw activity at least during the 12th, 15th and 16th centuries, and probably more continuously given that a substantial medieval structure (suggested by the presence of medieval roof tiles) probably stood close to Mother Grundy's Parlour, although there is no clear association between this evidence and the age of the board itself.

## THE PLAY CONTEXT

The game of merels or morris (or mill) has a number of variations, most of them commonly using 9, 6 or 3 playing pieces per two opposing players, on an appropriate board of 3, 2 or 1 rectangles (often termed 'squares') respectively,





FIGURE 3: Excavation outside Church Hole, August 2006. Photo: P. Pettitt.

each with connecting lines (Murray 1952, 55–64; Parlett 1999, 196–204). Players alternately place one of their pieces on to the board until all are positioned. Each player then tries to make a line (or ‘mill’) of three pieces; each time a ‘mill’ is made an opponent’s piece can be removed from the board. The game is lost when a player has less than the three pieces needed to make a ‘mill’. The design of the Church Hole merels boards matches that for the lay-out of the nine men’s morris variant (i.e. each of two players has nine playing pieces on the board at the start of the game). It is not unheard of to find multiple examples of boards on the one stone. On a 13th-century stone coffin lid from Holy Trinity church, Little Woolston (Bucks.) are two overlapping nine men’s morris boards, with a variety of

other boards alongside (Croft 1987, fig. 3). Nevertheless, the precision of the double layout on the Creswell board is uncommon. It seems unlikely that the smaller, inner board was incised second, not least because this would mean it had been deliberately incised into the empty centre field of the larger board, where normally pieces captured in the course of play are placed. It seems more likely that the inner board was cut first and then, because that board was too small or was simply a trial design to see if the stone was suitable, the outer board was cut, which being larger is more readily playable. There are no holes on the boards for pegged pieces and so the playing pieces were no doubt small stone pebbles, discs of broken pot sherds or bone. No such pieces have as yet been identified but they are easily

missed, some may still await identification in the antiquarian assemblages from the site. In this respect there is a worked bone object we need to take account of, which Dawkins (1877, 605) described as ‘a square polished bone, like a die cut in half, ornamented with circles on all sides but one.’ Presumably the face without decoration is the broken face and it seems that Dawkins was indeed describing a broken die. However Dawkins supplied no drawing and the artefact is now lost. Dawkins’ description is insufficient to ascribe a chronological context – it could have been Roman or it could have been medieval. Despite the uncertainty it is thought provoking to note that if we allow it to have been medieval then it indicated both gambling at a location away from the condemnatory gaze of church and secular authorities and (along with at least one other die) could have been used with the merels board. In addition to the known use of dice to see who started the game first, there was a medieval variant of merels that used dice to govern the opening moves of placing the pieces on the board. It is recorded in the 13th century Spanish, *Alfonso Codex* – a treatise on board games commissioned by and for King Alfonso X (1252–84) of Castille and Leon. Folio 92v shows such a game in progress and it is most readily accessible in the online edition of the facsimile of the *Codex* (Alphonso X website).

Whether the Creswell boards are 12th century or later in date they would appear to fit with the general dating spread of merels boards in Britain, namely 12th to 16th century. Within Europe the game was played as early as the Roman era, and it was also played by the Vikings but so far no certain pre-12th century boards are known from Britain (Austin 1935, and Holliger and Holliger 1984 for Roman examples; Hansen 1988, 58–64 & fig. 11b, and Murray 1952, fig. 22 for Viking examples; for a fuller discussion of the dating see Hall 2006) and the accepted convention is that the game was a Norman introduction to mainland Britain. In terms of surviving archaeological evidence boards most commonly occur as graffiti-incised designs on stone. The evidence has been reviewed several times, most recently in Hall (2006, but see also Micklethwaite 1892, Robertson 1967 and Shireff 1953), but in recent years the evidence base and the

contextual information derived from it has increased significantly. Though incised on different types of stone these boards exhibit common features: a shared use of raw material, incised designs of an ephemeral nature and a variety of stages of completion. Boards do survive in other media, notably wood (see in particular Croft 1987, Morris 1984 and Morris and Evans 1992).

The recent discussion of a stone incised merels board from Whitby Abbey (Hall 2006) drew attention to the monastic distribution of similar boards, with examples known from Whithorn Priory, Dumfries & Galloway; Dryburgh Abbey, Borders; Furness Abbey, Cumbria; Lindesfarne Priory, Northumberland; Arbroath Abbey, Angus; Jedburgh Abbey, Borders (Hall 2006, 29); Lihou Priory, Guernsey (kindly brought to the attention of MH by Heather Sebire, Archaeology Officer, Guernsey Museum & Galleries); Old Sarum, Wiltshire (Saunders & Saunders 1001, 174, no. 53 and fig. 51) and St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney (Thomson 2002, 44). All these boards are not particularly suggestive of clerical play, seeming more in tune with the merels board incised from a sandstone block excavated at Wharram Percy church and interpreted as ephemeral play activity of the masons who built the church (Atkin & Tompkins 1988, 26). That clerics did engage in playing merels is suggested by graffiti boards incised in various abbey and cathedral cloisters including Gloucester and Norwich, and on a slate from the chapel (with a schooling function?) of St Marnock’s, Inchmarnock, off Bute (Hall 2007, 21). To return to the recreational activity of the masons and their assistants, this is in-line with other ephemeral examples demonstrative of play by a range of lower social classes including shepherds, stockmen and urban labourers. The examples include boards from the shielings at Cronk yn How and Block Eary, Isle of Man (Cubbon 1960 and 2002); the board from a hut-circle at Ormiston, Fife (Hall 1998); the board incised into a wooden barrel lid from Carlisle (awaiting publication but details were kindly provided by Tim Padley, Tullie House Museum, Carlisle), and the board incised into a kitchen board from Eastgate, Beverley (Evans & Tomlinson 1992, 191 & fig. 95). In addition, castle-based masons or labourers playing the game are

evidenced, for example, by the boards incised into chalk blocks from Castle Acre Castle, Norfolk (Coad & Streeten 1983, 260 & fig. 51). Here three certain example were all excavated from the interior of a crudely built building abutting the Norman mansion. A similar example is known from Norwich castle (Micklethwaite 1892, 325). None of these boards can be described as in any way luxurious or of high status (in which context it is noticeable that a further block from Castle Acre bears an incised board for Tables, of simple and crude form, in stark contrast to the luxurious wood and bone example from Gloucester of broadly contemporary date – Stewart and Watkins 1984; Watkins 1985). All the contexts, whether on high status sites or not speak of lower status users, engaged in the ephemeral use of durable materials in pursuit of leisure and so in pursuit of their own time, almost certainly in defiance of god, the lord of the manor and the natural order. That said we have to acknowledge that high status boards, usually of wood and highly decorated, did exist and are evidenced by manuscript illumination. A pair of lovers (?) use such aboard in the 14th century Ms. Bodleian 264, f.60 (Reeves 1995, 78) and the already mentioned *Alfonso Codex*. F. 92v has already been cited for its dice here we should note that it depicts two players and two spectators – as they carry halberds they may well be off-duty royal guards. F.93v shows two male children/youths being instructed in the game (Alphonso X website).

Nevertheless, the general tenor of the evidence links the game with the lower social orders. 13th century and later written sources, including a tale of Reynard the fox and Latin verse specifically relate merels to the common man and the 14th century moralist Jehan de Brie says of shepherds that their good moral character permitted them to play nine men's morris but (apart from tip-cat) no other games (Endrei & Zolnay 1986, 67). Certainly by the 16th century various satires suggest merels was the game of the peasantry and urban poor, in contrast with backgammon, as the game of the urban rich and chess as the game of the aristocratic and church elites. A 1539 woodcut by Hans Weiditz, for example, shows noblemen playing chess, burghers playing backgammon and apes playing merels (Endrei & Zolnay 1986, 79 & fig. 69). Such satire

belittled the intelligence of common people, suggesting they could only crudely “ape” their betters and so served to keep them in their station. This was not an absolute hierarchy; archaeological evidence (including a number of lead badges and toys depicting chess boards from the Netherlands – for manuscript examples of the satire and the lead badges see Hall 2001) indicates that chess was popular at all levels of society and there are several very elaborate triple boards for chess, backgammon and merels known of 15th century and later date – the merels elements are richly decorated with heraldry and Biblical scenes (Endrei & Zolnay 1986, 67) for example – and again suggest the game was not solely confined to the lower social orders.

However the satire clearly had a degree of resonance and there is a strong temptation to see such graffiti boards as evidence for the widespread playing of the game in an opportunistic manner amongst the less powerful and less wealthy in medieval society.

Clearly the area of the Craggs was being used in the later medieval period. The Caves were a remote and suitable place to pen livestock, and the board could then have been cut and used by shepherds or cattle-men. The remoteness and inaccessibility of the Caves would also have been clear attractions for an outlaws' den, and it is possible to see the early 12th century coin evidence in this light. This alternate, possible scenario would certainly have included gambling and games-play during the languorous interludes of such a life-style.

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