

## BRITISH GEOMETRICAL ROCK ART

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Until recent discoveries of Palaeolithic engraved animals in caves at Creswell Crags (south of Sheffield), Britain's rock art was almost all geometrical/abstract, and belongs to the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age, some 4-6 thousand years ago. Because of this well-defined use of rock art in time and space, it has been possible to study it as a prescribed entity, without concern over superimpositions or a big spread of cultures.

The recording of this art has been largely my province over 30 years and more, so that I have now covered Northumberland, County Durham, Cumbria, and Kilmartin thoroughly, with a working knowledge of other British rock art regions, some of which have been well recorded. This has been in book form, in reports, and in an Internet site on Northumberland. It covers recordings of outcrop, monumental and portable rock art, building on work by antiquarians from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It has become possible to speculate on where new rock art might be found. Other major areas that are well recorded are West Yorkshire and The North Yorkshire Moors, with less prolific rock art recorded in Derbyshire and Wales. Ireland has a tradition of on-going research, especially in its passage grave art, with more research being done on art in the landscape too. In Scotland, although much has been done, a major area of Galloway needs a modern survey and recording. A 'new' area has appeared at Loch Tay, with considerable work being done there, and more rock art is now being found in areas of Scotland not previously known for it.

There is certainly enough data now to focus on what kind of symbols and motifs exist, of which 'cups and rings' are by far the most dominant. Motifs such as spirals occur in more limited contexts, such as in the open air in Galloway and Northumberland, with strong affinities with passage graves.

Although the symbolism is limited, there is a remarkable individuality at work in fitting motifs to rock surfaces. First of all, the rock surface itself largely determines what was to be hammered onto it, unlike some decorated megaliths and tomb architecture, where surfaces tend to be flat.

Throughout Britain the rock surface is sensitively considered, so that undulations, cracks and slope, for example, guide the placing of motifs. In a sense, the natural form does much of the work of design. The 'art' lies in the arrangement of symbols to fit a particular rock, which are basically simple in themselves. There are some variations from the usual circular motifs, but rectangles, squares, serpentine forms, grids, linear motifs, footprints and axes are so rare that their importance is very

limited. Motifs such as rosettes, and 'keyhole' shapes are still based on circles, and may occur anywhere, although there may be a specific concentration such as a group of 'keyholes' on one large rock on the Isle of Arran, Scotland. No matter how the data are arranged to show which motifs occur where, it will not alter the fact that cups and rings predominate. That is another interesting limitation on our study.

In addition to asking straight-forward questions about why they were sited where they are, who put them there, and when and why, we must also ask why the rock art tradition does not continue beyond the early Bronze Age in Britain as it does on the Continent of Europe. We might also ask why it is confined almost entirely to non-anthropomorphic and non-zoomorphic themes. It seems to fly in the face of other people's urges to paint marvellous animals or to show people hunting and farming, for example.

Most British rock art is in the landscape, in the open air, but recent investigation has emphasised its occurrence in monuments, for it is here where there is some chance of dating it by association. Cairnfields in Northumberland and elsewhere have revealed rock art in panels among cairns, in graves, and in the structure of cairns themselves, especially on the kerbstones, facing inwards and outwards. It is also in cairns where rare linear markings have been found. These differ from the circular pattern normally encountered; the recently-excavated section of a round cairn on Fylingdales Moor, (North Yorkshire Moors), which resulted from the discovery and initial recording by Paul Frodsham and Paul Brown, taken over by English Heritage, has a pattern that closely echoes the motifs on Beaker pottery (late Neolithic/early Bronze Age). The decoration faced into the cairn and was one of other decorated kerbs. Such a departure from 'circularity' is also present in two cairns in the Kilmartin region. (Beckensall 2005). These discoveries add to other discoveries, such as the simple cup marks on inward-facing kerbs at Fowberry and Weetwood (Beckensall 2003). Other cup-marked kerbs are being discovered in Northumberland cairnfields.

The departures from cups and cup and ring designs are rare throughout British rock art, and take the form of rectangles, squares, heart-shapes, grids and chevrons both in the landscape and in passage-grave art. Generally they have been thought to be early, but the Beaker-design is certainly not, and others cannot be dated. Other non-circular rock art found on monuments is the axe-motif, found only at Stonehenge and in Kilmartin cists. Those cairns that contain rock art favour the circular forms. Among the most significant discoveries are those made through excavation. The Fulforth Farm cist (Beckensall 1998) is particularly important, for the cremation contents of the sealed-in cist were dateable to the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age, covered with a purpose-made slab that had cups and rings facing inwards, and simple cup marks on top. The cist itself included two marked rocks, one of them with parallel zig-zags. Two mounds close to each other, excavated by the author in Northumberland, at Fowberry and Weetwood, both in settings of rich open-air art, had decorated cobbles incorporated deliberately in the mound structure. Other discoveries have shown cup marks

and cup and ring marks on the inside of cists, some of them brought in from outcrop rock or, in the case of an exciting new discovery of the Balblair cairn near Inverness, a broken stone with unique markings possibly transferred from an earlier monument (*Headland Archaeology*, 05/06/05).

These discoveries stress the importance of the need for a research-based programme of excavation of burial mounds and other monumental structures which will tell us more about their associations, and in particular the need for a total excavation of some sites. The Fylingdales excavation did not go far enough, for that could have established the kind of chronology that we long for. However, some of us can pin-point areas for excavation that might produce some answers to our vital questions. What is clear is that the range of motifs discovered in a few burials extends from simple cup marks to circular and linear forms (Brown and Chappell, forthcoming).

Passage grave art contains much of the symbolism found elsewhere in Britain, but is more exotic and concentrated. Again, we must be careful not to generalise from fascinating but limited (in terms of total British rock art) motifs. Spirals that are outstanding also occur in landscape settings and on monuments elsewhere. What is so fascinating about Irish art is the degree of skill and imagination that went into it, such as producing motifs that stand in relief and the sheer exuberance of combining spirals, concentric circles, lozenges, concentric arcs and rayed figures, for example. These are linked via the Atlantic seaboard to other sites which share some of these characteristics. This kind of symbolism in large structures with passages leading into chambers, surrounded by decorated kerbs and standing stones, rising like great bowls above the landscape, sends out the message of their importance. Inside, they are like decorated caves, shut in, inward-looking, excluding some, admitting others into the mystery. Their claims to the land, to the rights of their ancestors and the proclamation of their identity are outward and very visible signs. Its use spills over to places like Anglesey; large monuments of similar types may echo these Irish giants, but develop along their own lines and do not incorporate rock art, as in Scotland.

Access by sea is an important consideration in our study of rock art, not only with monumental sites, but with open-air rock art too. The closest parallels to British rock art have long been recognised in Galicia, although the important addition of animals there further determines the purpose of the latter. Some motifs are shared in Scandinavian rock art, notably cup marks and spirals, but these are universal. Some recent discoveries in the Alps of cups and cups and rings would fit happily into British sites.

A characteristic of all early rock art is that it was made with a hard stone pick, impacted on the rock either as a hand tool or with a mallet. These are not 'engravings', 'sculptures' or 'incisions'. Each pick mark in newly-uncovered examples is visible.

This brings me now to the important consideration of how far diffusion plays a part in rock art. It is clear that the circle is a basic, important, symbol all over the world, single, or in multiples. One does not have to be taught to draw a circle; it is a natural thing to draw. Britain has over a thousand known

circles of stone, often replacing circles of wooden posts, often incorporating ditches and embankments of earth, stone, or a mixture of the two. Such monuments have entrances; some have avenues leading up to them. A circle encloses and excludes. On such a scale as a henge, or a line of henges (as at Thornborough), or as an Avebury, Stonehenge, Long Meg or Temple Wood it rises above the landscape, with a function that has nothing to do with domestic residence. Rock art uses the same symbolism, and as most of the cups at the centre of circles and penannulars have a groove running from them, the 'entrance' is there too. Only a small number of these monuments, however, have motifs on their stones. Where they do, they are in significant places. For example, the pillar of decorated rock that lies outside the portal stones of the Long Meg stone circle is made of red sandstone, quite different from the igneous and metamorphic stones gathered together for the circle. The pillar may have already been decorated when it was brought to the site, and there are many hidden and destroyed monuments in the same area that it is impossible to produce dates without excavation of them all.

If rock art of the cup and ring type was so common on northern outcrop rocks, why does it not appear in more burials and monuments, especially at the largest such as Stonehenge? There is a possibility that motifs may have been used as body-decoration, without proof, though. It is difficult to account for the distribution of rock art.

The most common use of motifs is in the landscape, with its concentrations in northern Britain.

As Britain is almost without picture-images, the way in which motifs are used in the landscape leads us into reasons for their being in special locations. If we record and study these locations, we might be able to account for why they are there and not somewhere else. Geology, the rock formations which lie at the root of the land create scenery, although the way people use that land also affects its appearance. The main areas of rock-art: Northumberland, the Kilmartin valley, Galloway, Tayside, West Yorkshire, the North Yorkshire Moors and County Durham, share their characteristics with Galicia and northern Portugal, although the Iberian areas also have animal imagery.

As Northumberland has over 1000 panels of precisely recorded rock-art, each photographed, drawn and located precisely on the map, it should be possible to try to explain how that landscape has been used in the past. A fundamental point is that motifs are almost always located on outcrop and earthfast rock in what are called 'marginal' lands – not the most fertile areas for farming, but those at intermediate heights above fertile plains and valleys, on the thin soils of sandstone scarps, for example. Mostly they command extensive views, but one can only see the marked rocks close to. One would have to know where to find them – unlike prominent features such as cliffs or hills. They appear to mark natural trails and routeways, such as the scarp edges. They mark entrances to ritual areas such as the pit alignments and henges of the Milfield Plain.

There is a similar situation in Kilmartin, Argyll, where the fertile Kilmartin valley with its feeder streams running into the River Add is flanked all the way round by rock-art. It marks entrances to the lower land where the cairns and standing stones are situated, and some of the simpler motifs on outcrop rocks also take their places on monuments. One may walk around the rock-art sites, skirting a series of valleys, overlooking these monuments.

At Loch Tay in a long valley the images lie above the lake, generally with the more complex motifs at the highest points at similar levels.

In Galloway they cluster round the river estuaries in the south, many on promontories formed by the valleys, as they do in Galicia. They are not on the highest parts of the landscape, and here very few are in monuments.

County Durham has a similar pattern; there is very little suitable outcrop rock, so sandstone earthfast rocks and boulders moved there by ice sheets have been used instead, thus confining the spread of designs to a smaller area of a rock surface.

West and north Yorkshire art lies in the watersheds of the main rivers, largely on Millstone Grit; and there are concentrations of marked rocks with fairly basic designs, and few monuments. Again, much of the art is at extensive viewpoints, not necessarily the highest places in the land.

The North Yorkshire Moors, one of the latest areas in Britain to be investigated systematically, has produced not only some surprising new kinds of rock art in the way the symbols are combined, but has revealed again a pattern based on routes through the land, viewpoints and, significantly, a strong link with monuments, notably burial mounds. Mostly the rock-art, like that of Durham, is on glacially-moved boulders.

A study of these areas points to the rock art being put there by mobile people who were principally engaged in hunting and herding in the less-fertile lands. They probably had arable farming too, restricted to soils dry enough and light enough to cultivate at first, and the most fertile. Hunting and herding remained crucial to their lives.

Sometimes rock-art is found in specific places where there are springs and streams; naturally, water in a warmer climate than would have been essential to the stock.

In Ireland a particularly important study of one area, the Iveragh Peninsular, has shown how the rock-art is placed in such a way that it commands the main passes through the land, from coast to mountains.

In Cumbria, too, recent discoveries in the Ullswater valley, with its great lake, an important source of food and communication, show that the marked rocks lead down the feeder valley to the lake; the motifs make use of long parallel grooves which seems to represent the valley route.

One other location is confined to Northumberland in or on five rock shelters, one of which, uniquely, has four animal figures that could belong to any historical period.

Finally, portable examples are found everywhere, and many may have come from quarried outcrop and destroyed monuments, especially from numerous burial cairns destroyed by modern farming.

Most of what is contained in this summary is abundantly explored and illustrated elsewhere. English Heritage, dealing with rock art very late in the day, has financed a programme in Northumberland and Durham to record rock art. No doubt the use of new methods of recording will be useful, but the basic work of discovery, excavation and recording has already been done. Of far greater significance is the Beckensall Northumberland Archive web site, constructed over two and a half years, that has already topped 3.5 million 'hits'. This enables me to direct you, the reader, to a mass of information for yourself, with drawings, photographs (including 'bubble-world') and cross-referenced text in a way that was not previously possible. It is likely that the site will be adapted and absorbed by other electronically-recorded sites, making the sharing of knowledge easy, but many of the questions raised by rock art may well go unanswered. Speculation and gut-reactions are not fact, but only a beginning of interest. The rest is hard academic grind.

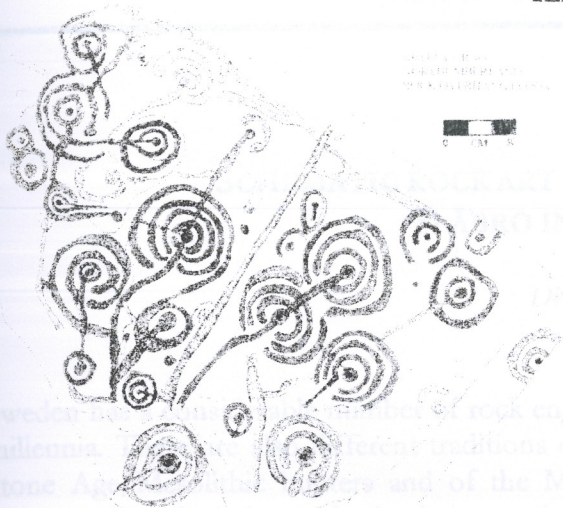
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- 2005. **Prehistoric Rock Art of Kilmartin, Argyll** (Kilmartin House Trust). *This also contains an up to date bibliography of British Rock Art*

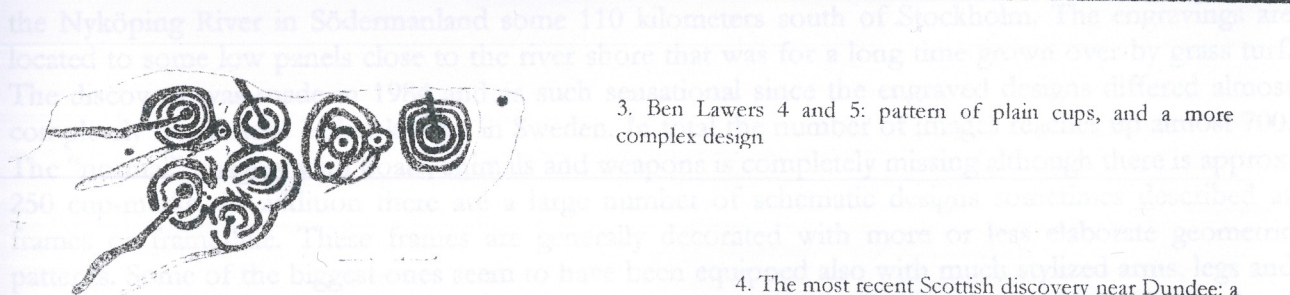
Brown, P and Chappell, G, forthcoming, 2005. **Prehistoric Rock Art of the North Yorkshire Moors** (Tempus)

## ILLUSTRATIONS



1. Ketley Crag rock shelter floor, Northumberland, a scale drawing showing a complete coverage of the outcrop rock surface. This is the author's standard technique of recording.

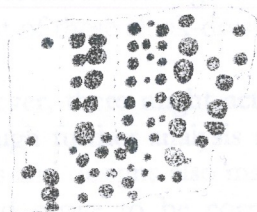
2. Ben Lawers2: newly-discovered rock art overlooking Loch Tay



3. Ben Lawers 4 and 5: pattern of plain cups, and a more complex design

4. The most recent Scottish discovery near Dundee: a marked boulder (2005)

BEN LAWERS SITE 1: NN64793 38507  
 Visited by P. and B. Brown and S. Beckensall in May 2003  
 Drawing from rubbing: S. Beckensall



BEN LAWERS SITE 5: NN65027 38290  
 NN64922 38290, NN65158 38786  
 Visited by P. and B. Brown and S. Beckensall in May 2003  
 Drawing from rubbing: S. Beckensall

