

## PREHISTORIC ROCK-CARVING IN NORTHUMBERLAND

Discoveries of rock-carvings in Northumberland date from the mid-Nineteenth Century, and since the early work of local antiquarians such as George Tate, any new discoveries have been recorded with reasonable accuracy, some with most impressive illustrations, especially when sponsored by the Dukes of Northumberland.

Today there are many sites open to view, although none is signposted or officially enclosed. Collections of carved rocks also appear at Newcastle Museum of Antiquities and at Alnwick Castle, but these “movable” rocks are only a small minority, usually being cist covers or stones taken from burial mounds. My book, “The Prehistoric Carved Rocks of Northumberland” (Frank Graham. Newcastle. 1974) provides a complete history of the discovery of all the known sites and illustrates a wide selection of what is available. Since then there have been a few additions to the list.

To make sense of the distribution, context and significance of the Northumberland examples, there are four points to bear in mind:

- 1 The carvings on earthfast rocks and isolated movable examples are on sandstone, which confines them mainly to the Fell sandstone scarplands of the county.
  - 2 All the examples that have a definite association with other objects belong to burials of beaker and food vessel types, and are all close to round barrows and on the lines of trackways.
  - 3 No matter how many variations there are in design, there are basic symbols of cups, enclosing grooves, penetrating and linking ducts and channels that establish a unified intention.
  - 4 The method of making these designs on rock is quite clear.
- Each of these points will be dealt with in more detail.

### *1. Location*

Northumberland has a wide coastal plain, and the main feature of its carboniferous system of rocks is a series of scarps facing a central mass of volcanic rock like the centre of an upturned basin. The main concentration of rock-carvings is found on the Fell sandstones.

The sites are prominent, not because they are on the highest points, but because they command wide views. The soils where they appear are shallow; some carvings have always been exposed, while others have been uncovered from a very thin soil. The high places also provide easily traversed ridgeways above the valleys, and the places where the carvings appear are, on the whole, easily linked.

The rock-carvers were not consistent in their choice of rock, which suggests that the reasons for carving at any particular place were determined by factors now lost to us. There are good flat surfaces that were used, but there are also uneven surfaces, difficult slopes.

In one exceptional case spirals and other designs were carved on a small cliff rising from a river bank, so that ladders or other means of reaching the rock surface would have been necessary.

In some cases large, isolated earthfast blocks were chosen—and these are always impressive. Some faint cup-marks appear on standing stones, but Northumberland does not have many of these.

## 2. Association

Carvings appear on cist covers found during the last century. The recent discovery of another possible cist cover at Hexham in the far south of the county shows that the destruction of burial mounds by farmers might lead to the cist cover being dragged out by chains and dumped on the edge of a field. One is always dealing with a small part of the past that has been spared.

The cists in this county contain beakers and food vessels, which gives the associated carvings an Early Bronze Age date. This is confirmed by my excavation of a partially-destroyed round barrow that was deliberately built on a natural base rock that was covered with carvings. Many stones of the burial mound were carved with similar patterns.

One further association comes from a rock-shelter that I excavated in 1975. Here the rock overhang was carved with a large basin, surrounding groove, and channel leading from its centre. The cremation burial on the floor of the rock shelter was in an enlarged food vessel. Two standing stones led to the entrance.

All the rock-carvings lie close to areas where there are, or have been, burial mounds—although it is also important to say that some of the heaviest concentrations of burial mounds have not revealed many carvings.

There is some evidence that the close proximity of small standing stones, burial mounds and carvings link up with natural routeways, and one can plot these possible trackways over miles of moorland.

## 3. Symbolism and Design

There are regional differences in the patterns, and there are many variations, but all rock-carvings use the same basic symbols.

The first is a “cup” that can vary in size from about 1 cm to a “basin” of about 50 cm, and its depth can vary from a very shallow depression to about 15 cm. A cup can stand on its own, or appear in a cluster with other cups. Cups appear in pairs to form domino patterns, circle other figures, or form the line of a curve.

Often the cup is the focal point of a design in which it is surrounded by one or more circular grooves, especially in the outstanding patterns formed by concentric circles of anything up to 1 metre in diameter with a cup as their centre.

The number of cups contained by a grooved enclosure that can be circular, rectangular, roughly square or heart-shaped, varies and it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the significance of the number.

A *duct* sometimes leads from the cup, and in the case of surrounding concentric circles it cuts right through them. The rings become open horseshoes, deliberately stopped with a ridge at the duct. These ducts are in some cases so long that they lead on to other figures, linking central cups together. Others look like the stems of flowers.

A groove may link a larger cup to a smaller one; a curved groove may join two equal cups. Sometimes a cup will have a groove that sticks out like a tongue.

Some ducts are so large that they are referred to as *channels*, and are deeply carved into the downward slope of rocks for many metres. A famous group at Rothbury springs from large cups.

So far the effects described by manipulating the basic symbols of cup and groove are of containment, linkage and penetration. But occasionally there are arbitrary figures that seem to bear no relationship to a total pattern: they nudge their way into the picture, or seem like afterthoughts.

But the most impressive always have a strong sense of unity, and design flows into design with a lovely sense of movement. In this way two sets of cups and concentric circles flow into each other like a figure 8, and come close to a spiral design.

There are two sets of spirals in Northumberland, and one is definitely on the same rock as the more usual “cup and ring” patterns. Significantly this stone was found with cremation burials. The other spirals are carved on the cliff rising from the south bank of the River Coquet at a ford, and there is a great variety of form there—some of it similar to other rock-carvings in the county, but others quite different.

Apart from the spirals, the other symbolic forms fit together very happily no matter what variations the carvers used. It used to be thought that rectangular forms might have been made at a different time or by different people, but at Fowberry there is a rock where circles, rectangles, cups, ducts, vertical and horizontal lines all flow into each other in a complex but unified design. This in no way denies that there are regional differences: of course different people produced different quality work and different designs, but it is also undeniable that they were operating with the same basic symbols.

#### 4. *Method of Making the Carvings*

Where the designs have been lying under the ground for years, excavation reveals that the patterns were chipped into the fairly soft sandstone with some sort of pick, for the “pecking” marks are absolutely clear. The tool could have been made of hard stone or metal, but no tool has been found.

Grooves were made in the same way, but in one circle the circle had been formed by pecking out a number of small cups side by side and joining them together as a continuous groove. This shows an interesting link with those figures that form a circle of cup marks around a central cup.

When the rock has been exposed to the northern weather the grooves can either deepen or become worn away: there is evidence of both.

## RECORDING

I use two methods of recording:

- a) *Photography*: frequent visits to sites in different conditions can make a considerable difference to the type of photograph. The designs come to life when the shadows are deep—perhaps this in itself tells us something more about them.  
Oblique sunlight, especially at sunrise and sunset, produces good results in many cases. Water on the rock with reflected sunlight is also good. Black-and-white takes well and is inexpensive—an important consideration for an independent unsponsored amateur.
- b) *Wax-rubbing*: the technique used here is similar to that of brass-rubbing in churches, but the rock texture makes strong, thin, flexible paper or other material essential. The result is excellent, as it is exactly to scale.  
Lichen and dirt can be removed with a stiff brush and a flat piece of wood.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ROCK-CARVINGS

It is difficult to offer speculations, especially when one reads so much nonsense—largely mystical—about fragmentary evidence in so many fields of prehistory. Yet there are several deductions to be made from the evidence in Northumberland that:

- a) The rock-carvings are basic symbols that are arranged in patterns.
- b) These designs are sacred in that they are associated with early Bronze Age burial.

The meaning of the symbols is less certain, but the use of so many circular designs relates to the same motive that inspired the circle or near-circle in henge monuments and round barrows.

The inter-connection, containment and penetration depicted by the art forms may well be an expression of the 'cycle' of procreation, birth and death.

To allow myself speculation on the meaning of the symbols themselves, my conclusion is that they are abstractions of the fertility goddess who appears so often in prehistoric art. Long before I was aware of the Northumberland carvings, while I was living in Malta I was struck by the many representations of the fertility goddess, ranging from realistic figurines of a pregnant woman to scarcely recognisable

abstractions. The breasts, womb and sexual organs can be reduced to circles, or cups and rings.

In Malta the megalithic temples themselves are elliptical in ground plan, one ellipse giving access to another. The basic decorative design is the spiral.

Links such as these can be made in many ways, and some will support the possibility that the northern cups and rings spring from symbolic representations of the Earth Mother. In the same way that the Christian cross has been expressed very differently in many art forms, it is hardly surprising that each individual craftsman will vary the design of the cup and ring symbol to satisfy his own innate sense of form and to offer something rich to his religion.



Fig. 1: Cup and ring marks at Weetwood Moor, near Wooler.  
The largest figure is c 60 cm in diameter.



Fig. 2: This rock at Dod Law, near Wooler, was exposed c 1850. The cup marks are in groups surrounded by rectangular and heart-shaped grooves (Scale: the film box is 6 cm x 4 cm).



Fig. 3: This rock at Fowberry Moor has horeshoe-type grooves, and its slope has been used to make vertical and horizontal grooves to accompany the cups.



Fig. 4: At Morwick there are spiral carvings on a cliff of sandstone that rises from the River Coquet. This type of design is unusual in Northumberland.

## DAMS, LYA — L'Art Paléolithique de la Caverne de la Pileta

... En visitant pour la première fois la caverne en 1971, nous y remarquons un grand boviné peint en jaune, non décrit précédemment et sous-jacent à un panneau à spirales rouges de la monographie de Breuil de 1915. — Ce fait nous incita à continuer nos recherches, qui se sont poursuivies pendant 3 années consécutives et qui ont abouti à la découverte de 134 figures ou groupes de figures nouvelles, peintes ou gravées, d'époque paléolithique. Nous avons également refait tous les relevés de l'abbé Breuil, en les complétant ou rectifiant ou fur et à mesure, ainsi que le plan de la caverne, celui de 1915 étant erroné.

L. et M. DAMS, Bruxelles



Fig. 46: Le panneau principal du Sanctuaire, 31-IV à 31-XIX et 31-M à 31-T.

### *Neuerscheinung.*

1 Band. ca. 120 Seiten Text in französischer Sprache, mit einem Vorwort von Prof. L. R. Nougier, Toulouse, und mit etwa 96 Kartenskizzen und Zeichnungen, ca. 64 Bildtafeln mit 130 Bildern, etwa 60 davon in Farbe. Format: 27 x 35,5 cm, Ganzleinen mit Schutzumschlag.

### *New publication.*

1 vol., approx. 120 pp. text (in French), foreword by Prof. L. R. Nougier, Toulouse, 96 map sketches and numerous line drawings, approx. 64 plates with 130 photographs (approx. 60 in colour). Size: 27 x 35,5 cm, cloth with dust jacket.