

Simple abstract carvings on outcrops of rock are found throughout northern Britain, but no one knew how old they were. Clive Waddington thought an excavation at Hunterheugh Crag, Northumberland, might help solve the mystery

Our understanding of 'cup and ring marks' – simple rings and hollows pecked into exposed rock surfaces – has benefited particularly from surveys by amateur archaeologists, including, in Northumberland, retired teacher Stan Beckensall, awarded an honorary degree by Newcastle University in May. Dating them, essential if they are to be identified with the people who made them, has proved difficult. This unusually large set of carvings (left) is at Ormaig, beside Loch Craignish, Argyll

ROCK OF AGES



In recent decades amateur fieldworkers have publicised the extraordinary outdoor gallery of prehistoric art to be found in northern England, Scotland and Ireland. The art is mostly simple and abstract, typically consisting of small circles and hollows ('cup and ring marks') pecked into rock outcrops. The sites are often remote with wide views, suggesting to some that the works were carved by mobile hunters or stock grazers.

The big question, though, is when were they made? There has been notably little excavation at British rock art sites, despite mushrooming interest in these fascinating designs. Investigations near cup and ring marked rocks at the Backstone Beck enclosure on Ilkley Moor, West Yorkshire, and the excavation of a cairn found to overlie a cup and ring marked outcrop at Fowberry, Northumberland, were the only attempts in mainland Britain. In Ireland important work by Blaze O'Conner has focussed on an outcrop surrounded by an enclosure bank at Drumirril, Co Monaghan, where excavations around carved rock panels have recovered Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ceramics, charred

material for dating and evidence for structural features. Cup and ring marks, however, remain stubbornly undated.

It was in the hope of improving this situation that we went to one of four cup and ring marked rocks on Hunterheugh Crag in March this year. At this remote site a small stone cairn overlay a carved rock outcrop (I use the term 'carved' without meaning to imply the use of a specific shaping technique). Dating the cairn would establish a minimum age for the art. In the event, our excavations told us even more than we had expected.

The Hunterheugh art is on the Fellsandstone escarpment 7 km north west of Alnwick and 14 km from the coast. Today the site lies on barren moorland and commands fine views, although prior to the Bronze Age the area is likely to have been thickly forested

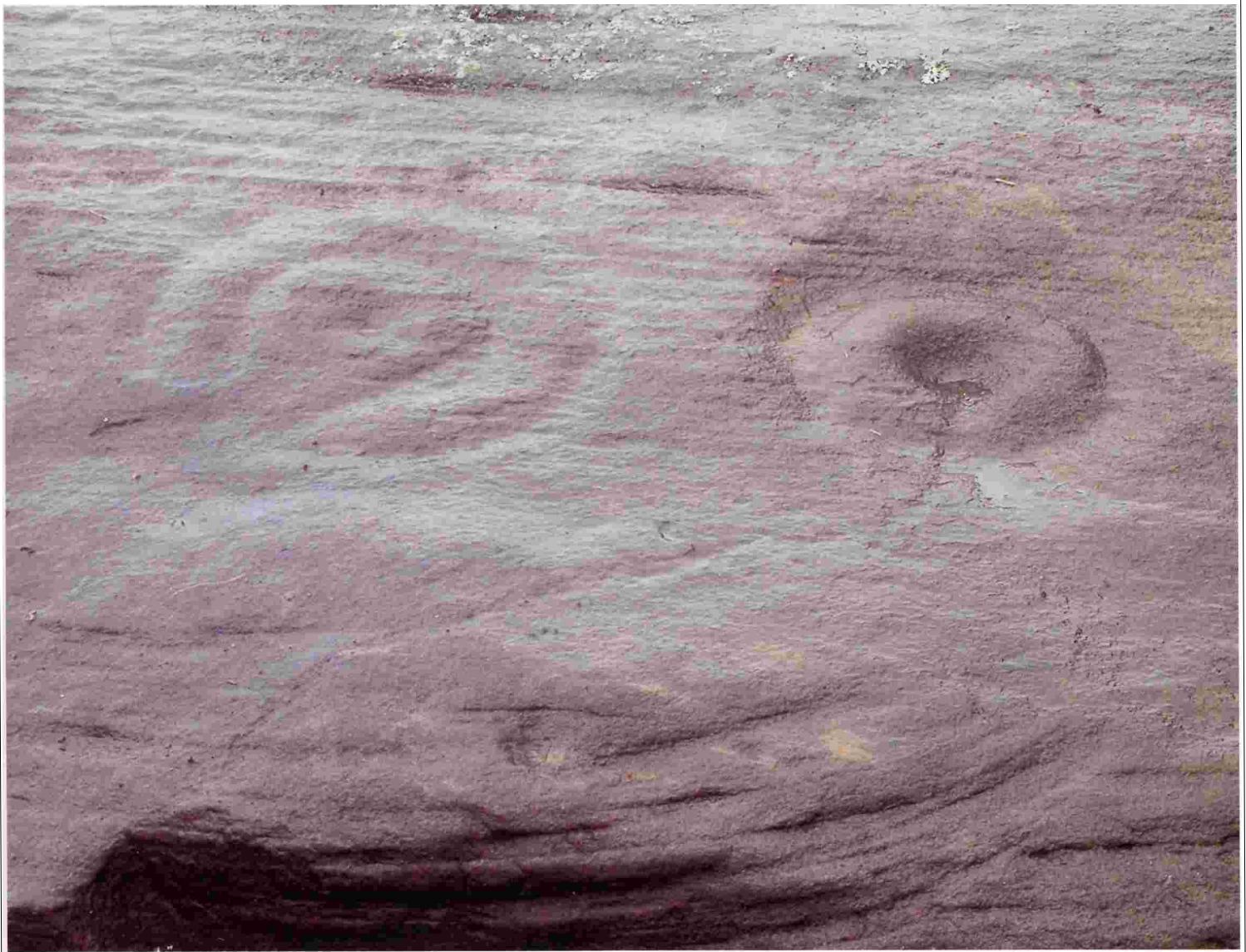
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with broadleaf deciduous trees. Before excavation a group of four carved panels had been recorded at Hunterheugh 1, which could just be made out amongst the thick heather.

Until now there has been no direct dating of carvings on outcrop rocks, although there has been a persistent view that they belong to the Early Bronze Age (2,000-1,500 BC). The Hunterheugh excavation has revealed a fascinating sequence of activity which demonstrates that the first carvings there must date back well into the preceding Neolithic. This important new evidence will undoubtedly affect how rock art is interpreted in the British Isles.

The first identified visitor to the rock was a Mesolithic hunter, who left a stubby flint end-scraper similar to tools from the Mesolithic house site at Howick 14 km away, which has been dated to around 8,000 BC. We found the scraper in topsoil close to the carvings.

The next episode of activity is represented by the first carvings. These are all on the natural rock surface and are very heavily weathered. The motifs incorporate undulations of the surface into their designs,



PHASE 1

Opposite: It was known there were carvings on Hunterheugh (top left). If they continued beneath a small cairn, likely to be Bronze Age, they would have to be older. Heather stripping (top right, co-director Aron Mazel on left) revealed unseen motifs such as the cup with ring discovered here (below spade tip). The rock was then excavated (bottom left). The remaining photos (here and overleaf) show what was found in reverse order of excavation, starting with the bare rock

(bottom right). There are eight very weathered phase 1 carvings on the large slab left of the 1 m scale; note how these incorporate natural undulations in the rock and are linked by natural or carved grooves. The most visible carving, above the scale to right, is on a later quarried surface and belongs to phase 2. Above: Newly discovered yet highly weathered phase 1 carvings (photographed in low light to help show motifs)

so that most of the carvings are connected to each other either by artificial grooves or by the natural rock slope which allow trickling water to flow from one design to the next.

At a significantly later date the rock dome was quarried, and some of the phase 1 carvings were broken through. New carvings were then made on the rock surfaces exposed by the quarrying. These designs were all located on the lower quarried surfaces and were in a remarkably fresh state with all the peck marks visible. These phase 2 carvings differ in style: there was no attempt to take account of the undulations and variations in the rock (with one exception), none of the designs is connected to another, and the shapes are more varied and in some ways more crudely executed. In fact they give the impression that their makers did not really understand the tradition they were trying to imitate.

One large slab of rock weighing several tons, with some phase 1 carvings on its surface, had been freed from the outcrop and moved towards the centre of the rock dome. Another quarried slab had been positioned next to it to create a cleft, in which a small cist box had

been constructed with its rock base gouged out to give extra depth. Amongst the collapsed material next to the cist a broken plano-convex flint knife was discovered, a type of artefact typically associated with Early Bronze Age burials.

No bones were found in the cist, no doubt due to the acidic conditions on the site. This presumable grave had then been covered with a stone cairn which also overlay some of the phase 1 carvings on the large quarried slab. Another stone setting was found higher up, apparently representing a secondary insertion in the cairn, probably for a burial. Again, no remains survived inside.

A collapsed stone field boundary represents the final phase of activity. It runs towards the cairn and then beyond to the scarp edge. At its other end the boundary joins the field system and paddocks that form part of a well-preserved Romano-British farm complex.

The cairn is key to dating the early phases of activity at the site. Such monuments are common in Northumberland and are known to date to the Early Bronze Age. Just 11 km away at Turf Knowe near Ingram, a cairn



covering stone cists has been radiocarbon dated to c 2,200 BC. In fact many Northumbrian cist graves have been found with Beaker pots inside them, suggesting that many of these monuments go back earlier still to the centuries around 2,500 BC.

At Hunterheugh the cairn is structurally later than the quarrying and phase 2 carving, although it is most likely that all these activities took place as part of the same overall event. However, the phase 1 carvings, which were heavily weathered even before the cairn was placed over some of them, are clearly from a much earlier period. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that the original phase 1 carvings date to the Neolithic, and at a relatively early stage at that. Further evidence for the Neolithic context of the phase 1 carvings is what appears to be the broken butt end of a sandstone axehead, found 1.2 m from the carved rock outcrop at the base of the topsoil. Ground and polished axeheads made from sandstone are known from elsewhere in Northumberland.

This is the first direct evidence for carved outcrops in the Neolithic, but earlier

indications have pointed in this direction. A number of 'portal dolmens' (a type of megalithic tomb) have cup marks on their capstones (eg Bachwen, North Wales) and decorated slabs, apparently re-used, have been found in other 4th millennium BC monuments (eg Dalladies long barrow, Kincardineshire; Street House cairn, Cleveland; Chatton Sandyford cairn, Northumberland). The carved rocks found in these settings sometimes appear to be re-used weathered slabs, suggesting they had come from rock outcrops, and that outcrops were the canvas for the original cup and ring tradition.

The Hunterheugh site is not alone in having carvings applied to newly exposed surfaces after quarrying. This can clearly be seen at other sites in Northumberland such as the Dod Law main rock, the North Plantation site

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at Fowberry and West Horton 1b. The pattern that is emerging is of a phase of original cup and ring marking on outcrop rocks during the Neolithic, and possibly early in this period. This is followed by their inclusion, and occasional re-use from outcrop situations, in a variety of 4th and 3rd millennium BC ceremonial monuments ranging from dolmens and long cairns to passage graves, standing stones, stone circles and henges.

There then appears to be a final phase of carving in the Early Bronze Age, associated with quarrying material at already carved outcrops, for use in what are strictly burial monuments. In some cases Early Bronze Age cairns were constructed directly over earlier rock art, as at Hunterheugh and Fowberry. In fact at Hunterheugh there is another carved rock (Hunterheugh 2) less than 100 m from the excavated site, overlain by another heather-covered cairn. What is more, in the case of the site reported here (Hunterheugh 1) the ancient carved surface was deliberately broken up and quarried prior to the construction of the cairn, and some of the quarried material was used in the cairn's



PHASE 2

Opposite: A large quarried rock (top left) forming part of the cist and cairn structure (removed), had clearly been broken off the outcrop straight through a group of phase 1 carvings. The cist box (top right, next to the north arrow which is 25 cm long) was below the collapsed cairn in a cleft formed by two large quarried rocks, the nearest of which has phase 1 carvings on, some of them covered by the cairn. Close up view of the cairn (bottom left,

scale marked at 10 cm intervals) shows cist box on the right and phase 2 cup and ring marks behind. Long after it was built, the cairn was incorporated in a Romano-British field boundary which continued beyond to the scarp edge (bottom right); the cairn has been removed, but the boundary can be seen at the bottom of the photo. **Above:** Newly discovered phase 2 carving on a quarried surface with peck marks clearly visible

construction. Perhaps the new carvings pecked into the quarried surfaces were intended as a placatory gesture, to replace older carvings destroyed by the quarrying when their original significance had been lost. Alternatively they may have been used to draw on the power of an already ancient place, to incorporate it into a monument to the dead.

This Early Bronze Age rock art seems to imitate the phase 1 tradition, but does not share the same sense of positioning on the rock surface. The design elements are copied, but the existing patterns of the rock are not embellished, implying a lack of understanding of the original carving tradition. The places in which this art is created clearly change through time, and areas of earlier carvings are later used in very different ways by later carvers. The meanings and uses of the cup and ring tradition evolved.

So cup and ring carving appears to have a long currency stretching from the Early Neolithic at one end through to the Early Bronze Age at the other. During this considerable period of time the places in which they are carved, the treatment of earlier

carvings and the stylistic deployment of carvings all change: this must serve as a touchstone for the broader changes that affected prehistoric groups during these times. One of the great things about art is that however abstract, it provides a direct insight into the cognitive world of its time. If our understanding of chronology and context can be brought into sharper focus we might yet be able to nudge ourselves towards a more accurate and refined understanding of these enigmatic motifs. As research continues it will be interesting to see if other regions of the British Isles show evidence for secondary episodes of rock carving, and whether these too manifest themselves as a preoccupation with cairns and burial in the Early Bronze Age. *Clive Waddington is visiting lecturer, University of Newcastle and director, Archaeological Research Services. University archaeologists, including Aron Mazel and Ben Johnson, conducted the excavations with volunteers and local archaeology society members, helped by a research grant from the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. A full report will be published in *Archaeologia Aeliana* vol 34 (see vol 32 for the Howick dig)*