

Art as Metaphor:

The Prehistoric Rock-Art of Britain

Edited by

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Ronald Morris (1902-1992) for his outstanding contribution to the recording and study of British prehistoric rock-art.

FOREWORD

As publishers and book-sellers gratefully know, of the making and selling of books on the eternal subjects like gardening, there is no end. How to grow vegetables and roses and house-plants will always find a market – even if *Green-Finger Secrets of Houseplant Success* might actually apply to fewer of us than *Why do your houseplants always go bad?* with its sage advice: “Never sign yourself up on the list for a doctors’ practice if the plants behind their reception desk are dying.” The continuing boom in British public interest in archaeology, alongside a new rise in exploring family history and genealogy, also continues to provide its hardy perennials. Stonehenge and the Romans in Britain are, like the pyramids of Egypt and mysteries of mummification, the hardy perennials of the field. It sometimes seems as if every archaeological subject has been done to death – or at least the ones that might be inviting: in 2004, an archaeological title, *Equids in Time and Space* (Oxbow Books), even made the shortlist in the annual Diagram competition the trade magazine *The Bookseller* runs for the oddest book title of the year. But, although it tried its archaeological best, it did not join the pantheon of champions, alongside the immortal *Proceedings of the Second International Workshop on Nude Mice*, the first winner in 1978, or another champion, *Celtic Sex Magic*, which may or may not have been archaeologically based.

New archaeological opportunities surely exist for the truly obscure and discouragingly technical. We have not yet had *Later post-medieval archaeology of chicken bones from domestic sites in northern England; with an appendix on misidentifications of turkey bones* and *Small and worn coarse-ware potsherds in British archaeology with its incisive sub-title, and why these dreary objects tell us nothing useful about life in the past*. But surely every worthwhile subject has been done, if not to death, at least a minimal once? The first encyclopaedic survey of British archaeology, William Camden’s *Britannia* (in full, *Britannia siue Florentissimorum regnorum, Angliæ, Scotiæ, Hiberniæ, et insularum adiacentium ex intima antiquitate chorographica descriptio*) was first published as long ago as 1586 - a full four hundred years before our time. Even it was not the first: the pioneer English printer William Caxton had even earlier printed, in his new shop in Westminster, a history of Britain with an archaeological element, a confident account of Stonehenge complete with an exact report of its date, and detailed report of the purpose and meaning of its creation – insights which more than 500 years later we struggle now to devise.

So is there any substantial and worthwhile subject in British archaeology which has rarely been properly written about at book length? Astonishingly, yes – the subject of this book. Rock-art (which should always be hyphenated) is the name for pictures or graphics painted on to or cut into natural rock surfaces in ancient times (The related tradition, of figures on portable boulders that have been moved and shaped, as seen in the ‘megalithic’ art of the great chamber tombs like Newgrange and Knowth in eastern Ireland is a related but different tradition more fairly seen as a kind of sculpture and architectural detailing). Rock-art is special and enticing for a special reason. Most archaeological remains report and reflect how human beings cope with stern controlling principles: flint, when struck with force, breaks in certain predictable ways as determined by the material science of broken crystalline structures and conchoidal fractures – so stone tools of whatever age or cultural context

reflect human skills and choice within that determined range; a comparable set of rules of technical possibilities largely shapes the form of ancient pots – again over-ruling the specifics of time and culture. Rock-art is different: it is a freer medium. And, of decisive importance, it is a direct record, made by ancient people themselves, of the world they lived in and as they knew it to be – miraculously surviving to us – as a record of the world they lived in and conceived the world around them.

So in southern Africa, the rock-paintings show mysterious beings, part antelope, part human – beings which peopled the imaginative world of the painters in that land. Engraved rock-art in Wyoming, in the high lands of western USA, shows a mysterious and sinister being, the strong woman of the watery places who drags the unwary under the water in the pools there to drown. British rock-art – in its major tradition, of the ‘cup-and-ring marks’ – is more reticent, in truth absolutely unforthcoming: simple pecked round holes, singly, in twos or threes, or more extensive groups or with elaborations. But those elaborations – rings round the cups, lines, irregular curvilinear shapes – are not elaborate as elaborations go. I do not know if it is just an excess of enthusiasm which makes me fond of this obscurity: that I largely study myself rock-art traditions that seem more obviously pictures of understandable subjects perhaps shows I prefer a softer task.

Attractive and enticing for whatever reason, the British figures certainly are: perhaps their enigmatic quality is a plus. When the Newcastle University project to digitize Stan Beckensall’s archive put up Horacio Ayestaran’s wonderful web-site (<http://rockart.ncl.ac.uk>), it was so popular it affected the University web-server. I heard of it myself that week from my son-in-law, a computer techie working in banking, who had come across it listed as one of best new sites anywhere on the World Wide Web.

Northumberland is an upland country with good rock, in particular, a narrow band of Fellsandstone running across the country where nearly all the rock-art sites are found. Years of patient survey by Beckensall there reported hundreds of sites, a total upped to over a thousand when Aron Mazel sorted and structured the archive, and then re-surveyed the sites.



Surveying British rock-art. Jamie Hampson at Horseshoe Rock, Lordenshaw, Northumberland. So-named for the parallel lines enclosing cup-marks nearly in a full circle. To the left, two sets of concentric rings.

What other decorated stones might exist in the slope, now grown over with vegetation? How easily might this one be lost if the grass is left to grow and swallow it?

British rock-art sites, as the photograph shows can easily come and go. They come to the surface when a rock buried under grass and earth for whatever reason comes to be exposed. They go when grass and earth chances to grow over them once more or more radical destruction such as setting up a new conifer plantation swallows them up – as one hopes now will no longer happen. Knowledge of them can be won and lost: until the archive was made, our knowledge of the Northumberland sites depended too much on the memory and hand-written records of Beckensall.



The observant eye of William Stukeley (1687-1765) caught many places in the English archaeological landscape for the first time. His drawing of the Royston Cave drawings is entitled 'The South Side of Lady ROISIA'S Oratory at Royston, and dated 19 October 1742.

Rock-art needs, as an essential, rock to carry the art. There is not much in the soft and chalky landscapes of southern England. Even there, though, we do find some: cut into chalk bedrock is a strange cave at Royston in Hertfordshire, an intriguing man-made cavern into whose walls are carved striking images that are clearly of medieval date and guessed to be of the 13th century (open weekend afternoons in summer; see www.roystoncave.co.uk). Its iconography of Crucifixion, Holy Family and certain saints suggest a link with the Templars. But for the most part, the rock in Britain is to the north, and with it the rock-art, especially in the Pennines, from the Derbyshire Peak through Yorkshire and Northumberland and into southern Scotland. Smart deduction from the map of its appearance, not long ago, showed rather an absence on the western side, in the Lake District and Cumbria generally. Understanding derived from the pattern of where in the landscape the rock-art is usually to be found prompted a focused search in the Lake District – and fine new sites, one of them as obvious as

can be and hard by a busy mountain footpath. Truly, you do not know what your eyes see until you know what it is you are looking for.

The most striking of the recent finds comes, again, from a focussed search in light of the pattern of what we know already. At the height of the last cold period in the Ice Age sequence, over 20,000 years ago, it seems the British Isles were so cold and dispiriting they had no human inhabitants. As the temperature climbed and the ice retreated, so came back the humans, crossing what is now the English Channel or North Sea that was then dry ground. The traces of their presence are nearly always found in caves, because the open-air sites consist only of vague lithic scatters with most other remains usually having decayed. Essentially the same, but far more extensive, are traces of these ancient hunter-gatherers in continental Europe, famously in the Dordogne with its rock-art sites like Lascaux with its celebrated images of bulls and other animals. Less famous, but equally old and extraordinary, are the engravings in the Dordogne sites. If the caves are much the same, the dates and cultural contexts much the same – should not art be the same? Perhaps the British caves are too weathered and exposed for paintings to survive: all reports of Ice Age paintings in Britain so far have proved false, through actual error or a wish to deceive. But there might be engravings, overlooked because, again, you do not know what your eyes see until you know what it is you are looking for. In 2003, Paul Pettit, Paul Bahn and Sergio Ripoll went looking, and in the Derbyshire caves of Creswell Crags found engravings.

I salute and commend this pioneering book, and its experienced team of authors. It comes at a fitting time, with the Ice Age art newly found and the cup-and-rings studied with a new thoroughness and intensity; it joins those two traditions to those from two other periods, long known and deserving of new attention: the slight traces from the Mesolithic, the period of hunter-gatherers in the new warmth after the ice had retreated; and the later traditions which bridge the space between the enigma of the cup-and-ring tradition and the medieval figures, like those in the Royston Cave, whose import and meaning we hope, at least partly, to understand.

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February 2007

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George Nash is a part-time lecturer and visiting fellow at the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Bristol. George has been a professional archaeologist for the past 17 years and has done extensive fieldwork on prehistoric rock-art and mobility art in Denmark, Indonesia, Norway Spain and Sweden. Between 1994 and 1997 he directed La Hougue Bie passage grave on Jersey, one of Europe's largest Neolithic monuments and recently he has directed excavations at Westminster Hall, London. He has also written and edited many books on prehistoric art including *Status, Exchange and Mobility: Mesolithic Portable Art of Southern Scandinavia* (1998), *Signifying Place and Space: World Perspectives of Rock art and Landscape* (2000), and *European Landscapes of Rock-art* (2001) and *The Figured Landscapes of Rock-art: Looking at Pictures and Place*, edited with Christopher Chippindale (2004). George is currently involved in two major rock-art recording and interpretation projects in northern Italy, looking at Iron Age house carvings and, in Wales, he is co-director of the *Anglesey Rock-art Project* (ARAP). He has also written and presenting five programmes on European rock-art and contemporary graffiti for BBC Radio 4.

Clive Waddington is currently the managing Director of Archaeological Research Services Ltd. and holds a research fellowship at Newcastle University where he was formerly a lecturer. Having completed a Ph.D. in landscape archaeology at the University of Durham in the 1990's, his research interests range from Mesolithic and Neolithic archaeology of the British Isles to rock art, geoarchaeology, landscape research methods to artifact studies. He has undertaken a wide range of archaeological reconstructions, some of them experimental, together with the establishment and design of heritage trails, outreach and education programmes and regular appearances on national television. His interests in rock art extend back to the early 1990's when he started researching cup and ring marks from a contextual perspective. He has published important articles on British and Irish rock art in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, *Archaeologia Aeliana* and in book sections. He is currently exploring the potential of fieldwork at open-air rock art sites and linking the site-specific sequences with local pollen records.



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Chapter 1

A coming of age

Aron Mazel, George Nash and Clive Waddington

The last two decades has witnessed a remarkable growth of interest in British rock-art and this has been accompanied by an increase in the volume of people studying the subject. More than ever, there are large numbers of people engaged in the recording, researching and publishing of rock-art and this has given rise to an expanding corpus of data, as well as new knowledge and insights. These people are drawn from diverse backgrounds, notably academia, heritage agencies, research consultancies, the amateur and independent archaeological communities, as well as members of the public who have contributed their time and effort to the discovery and recording of rock-art. This busy community of researchers and enthusiasts have pushed forward our understanding in relation to: the chronology of rock-art; the variety and frequency of rock-art; its landscape setting; the relationship of different panels to each other; the variety and types of motifs; possible explanations as to why the rock-art was made; and, the challenges facing the effective management of these vulnerable resources. In many respects the study of British rock-art has finally come of age and these developments have seen it take its fitting place amongst the worldwide corpus of rock-art research. This book, which covers various aspects of prehistoric British rock-art, emerges out of this exciting phase of research and presents a survey of Palaeolithic (Pettitt and Bahn), Mesolithic (Mullan and Wilson), Neolithic-Bronze Age (Waddington) and Pictish (Gondek) rock-art, as well as a history of rock-art research (Beckensall and Mazel) and new studies that cover landscape (Sharpe) and phenomenological (Nash) approaches, the associations between rock-art and Bronze Age 'cairns' (Vyner and Deakin), the development of a web-based rock-art data base that can be used to undertake detailed research (Mazel), together with a synthesis of the rock-art sites from South West England (Nash). The challenges for future research are set out in many of the papers, while the potential of fieldwork at British sites is highlighted by the new discoveries at Cresswell Crags (Pettitt and Bahn) and Aveline's Hole (Mullan and Wilson) as well as the results from excavations at Stoupe Brow on Fylingdales Moor (Vyner) and Hunterheugh Crag (Waddington).

While there is much to celebrate about the coming of age of British rock-art in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it should be acknowledged that, as Beckensall and Mazel have noted (this volume), the initial flurry of interest in British rock-art dates to the mid- to late 19th century when Victorian antiquarians in northern Britain started to question the views of the material world in which they lived as part of a much wider trend. But, despite the antiquarian interest in all-things-ancient, and the important work of Tate (1865), Simpson (1865) and others on British rock-art, in the overall scheme of things rock-art was generally considered a curiosity; its symbols impossible to scientifically interpret, never mind comprehend. Rock-art represented people that were not like us. This degree of interest was

in complete contrast to, say, the study and excavation of burial monuments where the general concepts of burial deposition could be understood. Here, archaeologists were dealing with people like us. Similarly, excavations of prehistoric forts and settlements such as Yeavering Bell in Northumberland (Tate 1863) posed less of an enigma as such sites could be readily interpreted as the defended villages of pre-Roman peoples. At the same time, specialists within the now famous rock-art areas of Europe were making a number of spectacular discoveries, such as the parietal art in south-west France and northern Spain, which in turn led to important developments in rock-art recording methodologies and interpretation (e.g. Beltrán 1968; Breuil 1935; 1952; Dams 1984; Leroi-Gourhan 1965; 1968). Despite some public scepticism and occasional squabbles between certain individuals, it became apparent that much of this rock-art was of great antiquity.

Rock-art and dating

What of the age of British rock-art? Recognition that this tradition mostly dates back to the Neolithic is a relatively recent development (see Waddington this volume). The term *Neolithic* had been coined by the antiquarian John Lubbock in the latter part of the 19th century. He suggested that certain elements such as burial and farming practices were indelibly linked with the modern world. However, it was not known what the extent of the period was. Indeed, Stuart Piggott in his seminal work on the Neolithic (Piggott 1954), considered the Neolithic to have lasted around 400 years. In the 1930s scholars such as Graham Clark were talking about a *Mesolithic*, a period that was sandwiched between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic. This new chronological terminology, based on a plethora of excavated sites and an expansion of typological methodology allowed archaeologists to formalise a British and European chronology, albeit without the luxury of any form of absolute dating. However, it is important to stress that up until the early 1950s chronologies were based partly on guesswork and only thereafter did chronometric dating methods, such as radiocarbon and dendrochronology, become available to archaeologists. Furthermore, rock-art, and in particular inscribed art, posed a much greater challenge in terms of relating it to the then recognised chronologies. The assumption was that if the rock-art lay close to a Bronze Age monument then it was more than likely the rock-art was Bronze Age, and this way of thinking has proved resilient despite the emergence for clear evidence of a much earlier origin. The process of dating based on more rigorous and certain archaeological relationships has really only taken hold in recent years (e.g. Burgess 1990; Waddington 1996; 1998; Bradley 1997) and established strong connections with the Neolithic.

Until recently, it has been considered that Britain did not possess a rich prehistoric rock-art heritage and was something of a backwater when compared to the better known European figurative art of the Alps, Iberia or Scandinavia. This misconception was challenged by the fieldwork of Ronald Morris and Stan Beckensall, the former through his work in the Central Lowlands of Scotland and north-western Britain and the latter through his work initially in Northumberland but thereafter in Cumbria, County Durham and elsewhere. Morris' lifetime of fieldwork culminated in comprehensive gazetteers covering Argyll and Galloway in Scotland (Morris 1977; 1981), the Isle of Man (Morris 1979), and one article that attempted a gazetteer for the whole of Britain (Morris 1989). At around the same time as this fieldwork was being undertaken, Beckensall started to trace and record the rock-art of Northumberland and other northern counties (e.g. Beckensall 1974; 1983; 1999; 2001; 2002). Between both scholars and the work of Marten van Hoek (1982; 1991; 1994; 2001), Tim Laurie (Beckensall and

Laurie 1998), Paul Brown (Brown and Chappell 2005), Graeme Chappell (e.g. Brown and Chappell 2005) and the Ilkley Archaeology Group (1986), particularly Boughey and Vickerman (2003), a northern British tradition was established. Importantly, this tradition was established by amateurs and independents, who became experts in their respective areas. Not surprisingly, this northern British tradition fitted into a much wider European context, referred to by some as *The Atlantic Tradition* (e.g. Morris 1989; Bradley 1997) which included a number of core areas of western Europe such as the Iberian Peninsula, western France, Ireland, Britain and southern Scandinavia. The dominant motifs from this vast geographical area included mainly abstract geometric and curvilinear forms, the most numerous of these being cupmarks (or *cupules*). Probably developing from, or at least associated with, these simple designs were concentric circles, cup-and-rings, sinuous grooves and occasional spirals. A handful of labyrinth designs are also known carved on to outcropping rock but these do not occur in the main cup-and-ring art areas of Britain and nor do they occur in direct association with cup-and-ring mark motifs. Other, less common abstract motifs were also inscribed in association with the curvilinear forms that included ladders and serpentine forms; the latter sometimes incorporated into Neolithic megalithic art (e.g. the petroglyph art at the passage graves of Barclodiad y Gawres and nearby Bryn Celli Ddu, both on Anglesey; see Nash this volume). However, much of the continental evidence differs from that of the British Isles in that there are often figurative designs accompanying, or overlying, the inscribed outcrops that bear the symbolic motifs of the 'cup-and-ring' tradition. In Iberia this includes forms such as daggers, red deer and warriors whereas in Scandinavia they also include boats, people and animals. In Britain there are only a handful of figurative rock-art images and these are always deployed on monuments, such as the daggers on the Stonehenge uprights or the axe-heads superimposed on the re-used cupmarked slab that forms a capstone on the cist at Nether Largie South. Given the subjects of these figurative depictions it is clear that such carvings must date to the Bronze Age, and as such must post-date much of the cup-and-ring corpus in Britain. The similarities and distinctions amongst the rock-art of Atlantic Europe show clear geographic patterns but this is an area that requires much more concerted research (see Waddington this volume) having only been considered in any detail by Bradley (1997).

A very British tradition

It is now evident that distinctive rock-art traditions are present within each of the prehistoric periods in Britain and that, although related, reveal differences to their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. In particular, for the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods the British rock-art corpus is dominated by the use of abstract symbols, with only rare examples of anything figurative. It is precisely because the British motifs are mostly symbolic and of an abstract nature and therefore difficult to 'read' that there has been so little attention paid to them, until recently, by professional archaeologists. This was primarily because the interpretive potential of these remains was considered too enigmatic, subjective and risky for people with professional reputations, and such an attitude still lingers in some quarters. Despite the interpretive difficulties that such a subject matter may appear to pose, there is a realisation that much can be addressed by the study of these designs because as symbols they rely heavily on the context in which they were experienced to shape the intended message and this context is, in many cases, still preserved. Once their symbolic nature is grasped they can be seen to not only act as metaphors, but also as devices for conflating complex information into a stylised design. Furthermore,

by studying the variation in contextual deployment through time it is possible to look at how the significance of these symbols was transformed, and in so doing they can be seen to provide something of a touchstone for gauging ideological change throughout their period of use (e.g. see Waddington 1998).

Rock-art scholars are looking more intensely at old and newly discovered sites and continually adding to this distinctive corpus. Up until 2003, no Upper Palaeolithic or Mesolithic rock-art was known with certainty in the British Isles, despite there being significant portable assemblages. There had, of course been several false dawns. The Abbé Breuil had possibly found 'steaks' of red ochre in Bacon Hole (hence the name) on the Gower Coast in the early part of the 20th century and later, on the Doward in south Herefordshire, possible painted images had been found within a rock-shelter. Both 'discoveries' proved groundless and the hunt went on, with success only arriving at the beginning of the new millennium with the dating of the inscribed cave art at Cresswell Crags (Pettitt and Bahn, this volume) and the discovery of potential Mesolithic symbols at Aveline's Hole (Mullan and Wilson, this volume).

Early artistic traditions

Until very recently the meagre archaeological record for artistic endeavour in the British Isles prior to the Neolithic comprised a handful of examples of mostly mobiliary art (see Pettitt and Bahn, this volume). This type of art, of which most is figurative, has recently been expanded for the Late Glacial and Early Holocene periods in England. Due to harsh environmental conditions during the Early Upper Palaeolithic (c. 35000 – 16000 years ago) there was little human activity in Britain and therefore one can assume little in terms of mobiliary art and, of course, rock-art. However, re-evaluation by, in particular Stephen Aldhouse Green (University of Newport) and Jill Cook (British Museum) at Paviland Cave on the Gower Coast, South Wales shows that humans were roaming an Arctic tundra landscape at around 25000 years before present, probably during the summer months. Successive excavations at this important cave site from the early 19th century revealed a near complete Late Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic sequence of human activity, spanning some 20000 years. At a time when the Devensian ice sheet was at its maximum a hunter-gatherer was buried in a shallow grave in the floor of the cave. Accompanying this male burial originally referred to as the 'Red Lady of Paviland' on account of it having been sprinkled with red ochre, was an array of ritual items including adornments made from ivory. The presence of such personal adornment and the ochre suggests that the lives of these people was deeply immersed in ritual, symbolism and, perhaps, belief in an afterlife. In addition to this discovery, further significant ritual and symbolic portable items from this period have been found in cave sites such as Kendrick's Cave in north Wales and Robin Hoods Cave at Cresswell Crags, Derbyshire.

From Church Hole Cave at Cresswell Crags is Britain's earliest rock-art to date. Discovered by a team of academics in 2003, a number of Late Upper Palaeolithic engraved figures, several in bas-relief, were found on the walls and ceiling of the cave and have been dated to around c. 14 ka cal. BC (see Pettitt and Bahn, this volume). The art, some of which had been covered by layers of calcium carbonate and subsequent graffiti from the 1940s, comprised mainly zoomorphic figures that include a large red deer and the head and neck of a wild bird. With this first uncontested evidence for Palaeolithic cave art

in Britain, the world press quickly brought attention of this discovery to a wide audience and suddenly rock-art specialists were re-evaluating other cave walls in Britain.

In 2003, and following the Cresswall discovery, members of the University of Bristol Speleological Society explored the inner cave walls of Aveline's Hole, a cave in the Mendip Hills of Somerset that has produced a large quantity of Mesolithic flintwork and human remains (Schulting and Wysocki 2002). Whilst undertaking this work the team discovered one of Britain's few potential Mesolithic rock-art sites (see Mullan and Wilson this volume). The image, comprising a simple multiple mesh design, was considered to be quite different to the post-medieval and modern graffiti that usually adorns the caves within this and other cave areas of Britain. Indeed, there were stylistic parallels found on portable art from this period, both within the British Isles and in northern Europe that suggested a Mesolithic date. Together with the four legged 'deer' carvings found inside a Mesolithic rock shelter at Goatscrag, Northumberland (van Hoek and Smith 1988), which may date to this period (Waddington and Passmore 2004), these sites provide a tantalising glimpse of an as yet largely unrecognised tradition of Mesolithic rock-art.

Rock-art of the Neolithic and Bronze Age

While the landmark discoveries of Upper Palaeolithic and probable Mesolithic art have extended the chronology of British rock-art by thousands of years, emphasizing the need for a new overall narrative, the British rock-art corpus remains dominated by the thousands of rock-art panels made throughout the Neolithic and, to some extent, the Bronze Age. Over 1000 rock-art panels are known in each of Northumberland and Yorkshire and there are similar quantities in the southern and western counties of Scotland. Considering the abundance of known panels, and their extensive geographical spread from Argyll to Cornwall, it is remarkable that the makers of these designs have, for whatever reason, used such a limited set of symbols. Further, we do not know which sections of society, if not all, had access to these symbols, and whether the nature of access changed during the 1000 - 2000 years that they were in use.

For passage grave art, of which there is some in western Britain, it is likely that the places in which it was deployed were only accessible to certain members of society, and possibly an elite group at that. This possibility becomes more conceivable when we consider our own society and witness the protocols associated with rank and hierarchy and the way commodities and information flow between one social group and another. This segregation, so clearly visible in 19th century European society is also clearly visible in contemporary religion. For example, during communion, the Catholic priest will usually conduct part of the Mass in Latin, more poignantly, the priest will, on occasions, face the altar, turning his back to the congregation. The congregation, whilst partially understanding what part of the mass the priest is performing, will not fully understand the intricacies what he says or does with his back to them. Here, knowledge is power and this power has been an essential mechanism in controlling Christian societies over the past 1500 years. In medieval England where the peasantry could not read or write and the spoken language was not Latin, the church, and the people who controlled it would have had access to a body of information and ritual that was not available to most other people. Likewise, rock-art and its pattern of deployment within the landscape and across a given panel may have, at times, acted similarly, with possibly only an elite grouping knowing what the symbols represented and only them able to 'interpret' the symbols to the rest of the group.

Though small, the figurative repertoire of axes, daggers, footprints and maybe ladders, echo the designs of this sort that can be found more commonly throughout the Atlantic and Scandinavian rock-art traditions of Europe. British Neolithic-Bronze Age rock-art can be divided on the basis of its contextual setting between those that occur on natural rock outcrops or boulders and those that are incorporated into built monuments. The rock-art on natural rock surfaces is predominantly distributed across northern Britain from the Peak District northwards to Argyll and Perthshire, while on the other hand the rock carvings found incorporated into Neolithic ceremonial monuments can be found throughout much of the British Isles with the only notable exception being South East England and middle southern England. However, the sites with passage grave art occupy only a restricted part of Britain, namely the north-western seaboard from Anglesey north to Orkney. There are, however, other sites around the coastal margins of northern England where passage grave art influence can also be seen such as the spirals on the river cliff at Morwick, Northumberland, the Stoupe Brow cairn on Fylingdales Moor, North Yorkshire (see Vyner this volume; Brown and Chappell 2005), or the various Cumbrian sites that have passage grave style motifs (see Sharpe this volume).

In Ireland distinctions can be made between the location of cup-and-ring rock-art and the location of passage grave art (see Waddington 2007). In all areas, the cup-and-ring rock-art inscribing techniques are usually confined to carving (i.e. cutting or gouging out the rock – perhaps with a sharp flint) and pecking. However, there are a small number sites, usually those with passage grave or figurative art, with carved bas-relief images (e.g. the axes on the Boscawen-un Stone Circle). The complexity of some passage grave art designs, particularly those with all-over geometric decoration or intricate designs such as spirals or labyrinths, suggests these artists had grasped concepts of geometry and symmetry as well as the aesthetics behind a planned and ordered layout of motifs. This can be contrasted with the aesthetics and layout of the naturalistic cup-and-ring tradition (see Waddington this volume; Waddington 2007). Given the complexity of some of the passage grave art panels it is likely that such designs were sketched-out prior to execution.

The passage grave art in England and Wales is restricted to three monuments and comprises a suite of images that are otherwise more typical in Ireland, and to a lesser extent, Scotland. The rock-art is found within two passage grave monuments in North Wales and one in north-west England that date to the later Neolithic and are thought to be roughly contemporary with the other passage graves in northern and western Britain. The carvings, which include multiple concentric circles, cupmarks, footprints, serpent-forms, spirals and zigzags, appear to be deliberately placed within the architecture of the monuments and are usually found within the chamber and inner passage areas (Nash 2006). Outside two of these monuments, cupmarks are strategically placed on exposed natural rock outcrops suggesting that perhaps two phases of carving is in evidence.

Rock-art after the early Bronze Age

After the early Bronze Age there is little evidence for the purposeful inscribing of rock until the Iron Age when the lavishly decorated ‘symbol stones’ of the Picts make their appearance in the archaeological record. However, this should in no way de-value the artistic expression of middle Bronze Age to later Iron Age people who seem to have transferred their creative talents to other media; namely metal. The metalwork of the Middle-late Bronze Age includes some of the most marvellous works of art whether these are elaborate weaponry and armour or fine dining objects such as gold cups.

Similarly, the Iron Age heralds the introduction of Hallstatt and La Tène decorative styles and elaborate display objects that also range from the military accoutrements to personal adornment such as torcs, mirrors and brooches. Despite the attention on fine metal objects, the rock-art of the Neolithic and Bronze Age was in all likelihood recognised by some Iron Age people who either made their own or incorporated earlier decorated rock-art into some of their constructions. This includes the positioning of cupmarked and cup-and-ring marked rocks in souterrains and the placing of cupmarked boulders in hillfort ditches, as was the case at Ballcross, Bakewell (Stanley 1954).

After the withdrawal of the Roman legions the early medieval period experiences a reawakening of interest in the sculpting of rock and this is most clearly seen in the figurative art of the Pictish symbol stones (Gondek this volume) and the religious artwork of Celtic and Anglo-Scandinavian Britain. The latter artwork is tied to early Christianity and we have a means of understanding something of these motifs through our knowledge of pagan mythology and the story of Christ. However, with no means of identifying directly with the Pictish stones these pose a challenge to archaeologists more akin to that of earlier prehistoric rock-art than the rock-art of Celtic and Anglo-Scandinavian Britain.

There are a number of slightly different interpretations as to what rock-art means and what it represents. In Europe and America carved rock-art is commonly referred to as a petroglyph. There is, perhaps, a little too much assumption in the use of the word 'art', especially when describing simply carved motifs such as cupmarks, or single and multiple lines. Can we as rock-art historian/specialists be sure that the inscriber is an artist and what he or she was carving was art? It is possible that the intention held by the inscriber had more to do with adhering to ritual/ideological observance and protocols than artistic endeavour, and this could to some extent explain the repeated use of a very simple and restricted set of motifs over thousands of sites in the British Isles. Therefore, when the term rock-art is used throughout this volume it is intended primarily as a generic, descriptive term only and not that the production of 'art' was necessarily the intention of the maker.

The term style is also somewhat ambiguous and is used mainly to describe particular characteristics of the image, or images, carved onto a panel. However, we postulate that style differentiates between rock-art methods and techniques such as carving, gouging and pecking and the way these techniques were used to construct the image. The methodology and technique may in fact be the preferred way to execute rock-art rather than the aesthetic nature and intentionality of the image itself.

Finally, the term 'carving' can also cause confusion. Throughout this volume the term is usually used as part of a generic description for rock that has been sculpted in some way to produce one or more motifs. However, it is recognised that this term is more loaded than this as it indicates a very particular method of production, but in most cases throughout this volume this term is used in the former, and not the latter, way. Perhaps it is time for the British rock-art community to sharpen up its stylus' and use the terms more carefully?

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