Historic England

Prehistoric Rock Art

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to prehistoric rock art. The term is most often applied to a specific style of carvings created in the late Stone Age and Early Bronze Age (approximately 3800 BC to 1500 BC). Archaeologists make a distinction between rock art associated with monuments and rock art 'in the landscape' – found on natural outcrops and boulders – which makes up the majority of surviving examples. Most rock art sits isolated in the landscape, without any obvious associations that can be detected from the surface traces: this is part of what makes it so difficult to date and interpret. Descriptions of rock art and its development, along with a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover
Chatton Park Hill, Northumberland. Many rock-art panels occupy outcrops with excellent long-distance visibility.

Introduction

In Britain, the term ‘rock art’ is sometimes used loosely to refer to all prehistoric carvings on rock, spanning the 10,000 years prior to the Roman period. This includes a wide variety of styles, from life-like Palaeolithic depictions of animals like those found in a Derbyshire cave in 2003, to Bronze Age depictions of bronze axe-heads found on Stonehenge and other monuments, to depictions of Celtic warrior-gods in northern England carved during the early centuries of the Roman occupation.

However, the term is most often applied to a specific style of carvings created in the late Stone Age and Early Bronze Age (approximately 3800 BC to 1500 BC). This type of carving shares a limited set of motifs, with numerous variations around the main themes, and is found throughout northern Europe in a wide range of contexts, from isolated natural outcrops to burial cairns and standing stones.

The most common motifs are the simple ‘cup mark’ (a shallow bowl shaped depression a few centimetres across) and the ‘cup-and-ring’ (a cup mark surrounded by one or more concentric circular grooves); Ordnance Survey maps use these terms to identify prominent examples. Many carvings also incorporate or are framed within linear grooves. Over 5,000 separate rock art sites are known in Britain, of which more than half are in England.

Figure 1
Chatton Park Hill, Northumberland, by moonlight. If feasts and ceremonies took place at such sites, the motifs may often have been seen by firelight and moonlight.

Describing such carvings as ‘art’ is probably misleading, for while complex combinations of motifs, and individual examples, are often very beautiful (Figure 1), aesthetic values do not seem to have been the most important consideration for the people who created them. These motifs do not, as far as anyone can now tell, depict an actual thing, such as a human or animal figure, a map or constellation, but are abstract and held some unknown, possibly sacred, meaning for those who created and observed them.

A wide range of interpretations – some far-fetched – have been suggested since rock art was first recorded in England in the 1820s. It is possible, given the long time-span and huge area across which these motifs were used, that they held different meanings for people in different places and at different times.

Investigations have shown that only a small proportion of the motifs that must originally have existed even on rocks have survived 35 centuries of quarrying and agricultural improvement, so the evidence that may allow a better understanding of this enigmatic phenomenon is now very rare (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Gled Law, Northumberland. The deep channel around the motifs appears to have been chiselled out in order to remove the stone to a private collection.

1 Description

A rock surface bearing motifs (called a 'panel') may contain anything from a single cup mark to dozens of interlinked cup-and-ring marks connected by artificial grooves and/or natural channels in the rock (Figure 3). Spirals, horseshoes and other variants occur, sometimes framed within, or linked by curvilinear grooves. Grooves radiating from the centre of cup-and-ring marks (known as 'gutters') are common. There is almost no evidence that the motifs were artificially coloured in any way.

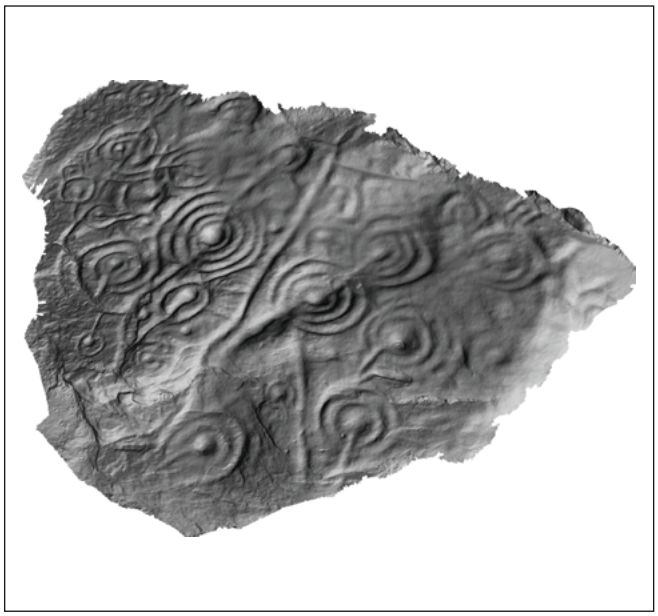


Figure 3
Ketley Crags 'rock shelter', Northumberland. The pattern channels water dripping from an overhang; recent research suggests that the rock once overlooked a spring, now dry.

Flat or gently inclined surfaces were generally selected, usually on sandstones or millstone grits, which are soft enough to cut into given a few hours. Rock art is mainly confined to upland areas of northern Britain where these rock types are common, although isolated examples are found further south, with a concentration of cup-marked stones in the south-west (Figure 4).

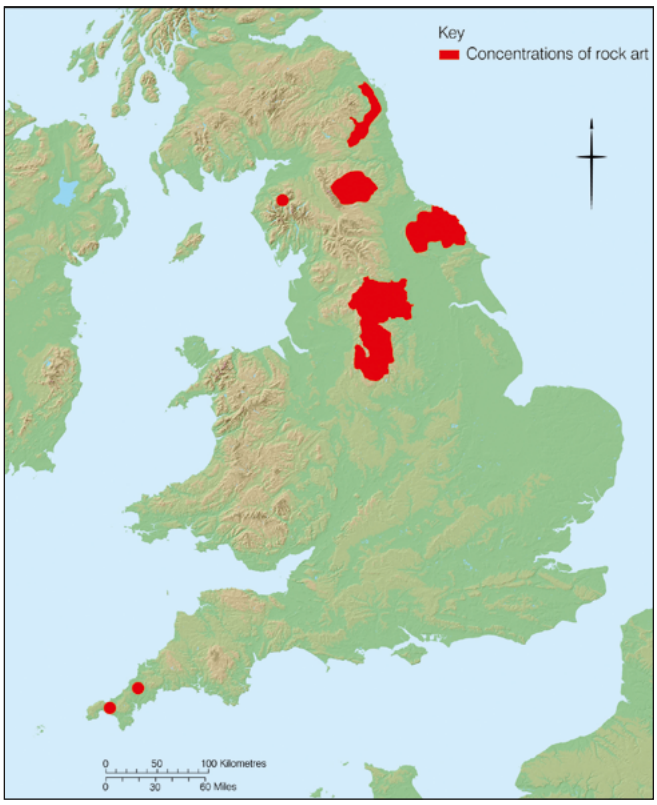


Figure 4
Distribution of rock art in England (many more examples exist in other parts of the British Isles).

All these rock types are naturally prone to weathering in patterns that can be difficult to distinguish from artificial marks and there are many instances where natural hollows and channels have been incorporated into artificial designs.

Different techniques were used to create the marks: scratching was sometimes used to begin the design; 'pecking' (hammering with a pointed stone) was often used to do initial rough work and sometimes never smoothed over; grinding was often used to smooth the surfaces. It is not always possible to work out whether a motif was created in a single episode of work: a cup mark could have been enhanced after several years, or

even centuries, by re-carving or by the addition of rings. Similarly, complex panels may have been created in single day by several people, or over a much longer period by one or more people returning to the same place. It is therefore difficult to talk about 'designs', since this term perhaps implies a single, static origin.

Archaeologists make a distinction between rock art associated with monuments (discussed below) and rock art 'in the landscape' – found on natural outcrops and boulders – which makes up the majority of surviving examples (Figure 5).

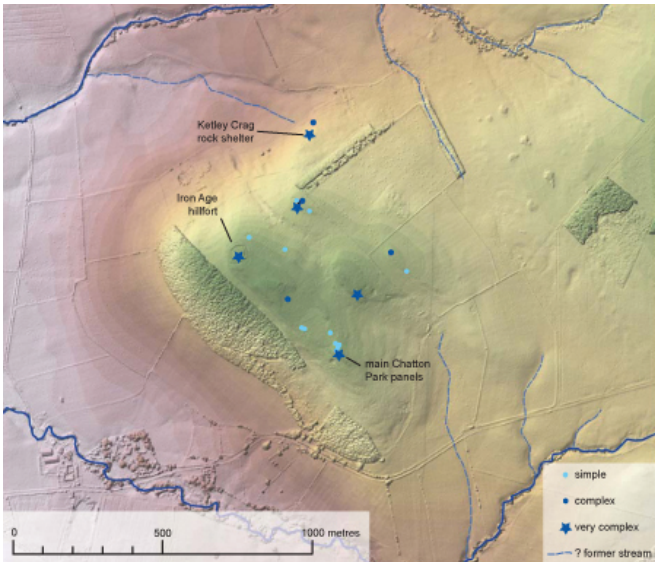


Figure 5
Chatton Park Hill, Northumberland. The motifs lie on gentle inclines facing away from the view, as though intended to be seen by people looking towards the plains.

In some ways, rock art in the landscape presents more straightforward questions (as long as the rock in question has not been moved: some very large stones have been moved in the cause of agricultural improvement). Sometimes, isolated single boulders were chosen, while in other cases extensive outcrops became the focus for dense concentrations of motifs.

Research has shown that many of the larger rocks on which rock art occurs are natural landmarks, recognisable from a long way off and, conversely, commanding long-distance views. These prominent panels are often inter-visible with specific low-lying areas or passes, perhaps representing territories and routes respectively, suggesting that the panels may have served as boundary markers and/or 'signposts' (Figure 6). On the other hand, some motifs were placed on rocks that are not conspicuous even at close range, suggesting that some panels were 'public', but others 'private'.

Figure 6
Old Bewick, Northumberland. This eye-catching boulder overlooks a natural pass between two low-lying areas.

Since individual motifs can only be discerned close-up, perhaps the view from the panels was an important consideration. Alternatively, perhaps the knowledge that a distant eye-catching rock was marked in some way was more important than the knowledge of exactly what the marks comprised.

2 Chronology

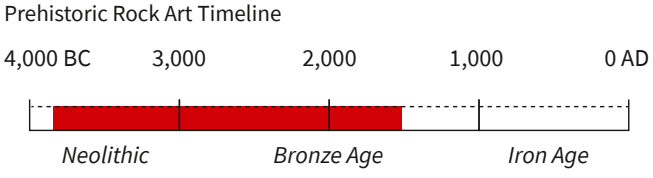
Most rock art dates to the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age (about 3800 – 1500 BC), but within this long time-span, the dating of most examples remains imprecise. Apart from the problems of telling if and how individual motifs and panels may have been modified over time, there are several reasons for this.

Bare rocks are seldom directly associated with other datable remains; nor have scientific dating techniques been successfully applied to exposed rock surfaces. In addition, the cup-and-ring style cannot generally be linked on stylistic grounds to, for example, the designs on pottery or other artefacts that can be dated more accurately. The cup mark is such a simple stylistic device that it may have been in active use for much longer than the more complex motifs. Rock art associated with other prehistoric monuments which can potentially be dated is therefore extremely significant (see below).

A few examples of rock art can be more reliably dated, partly on stylistic grounds because of their similarity to designs on certain types of pottery and partly because they are often found in burial monuments which are potentially easier to date, notably the Neolithic 'passage tombs' found in Ireland.

The designs in question, of which relatively few are found in England, often comprise geometric patterns, especially interlocking triangles, chevrons and diamonds (Figure 7). These are so different in style from the more common cup-and-ring style motifs that it is perhaps appropriate to think of them as being an entirely different type of artefact. Yet they appear to have been made within the longer timespan of the cup-and-ring tradition and in some cases are actually found in monuments alongside rocks bearing cup marks and cup-and-rings. Their use may have spanned a somewhat shorter period of time, between 3500 BC and 2000 BC, but, like other 'portable' stones, it is possible that they were sometimes reused in burial monuments built after 2000 BC.

Figure 7
This stone on Fylingdales Moor, North Yorkshire, is a rare example of a geometric design comparable to designs on pottery and Irish 'passage graves'.



3 Development of the Asset Type

The fact that archaeologists can interpret the meanings of rock art with little more confidence now than they could 200 years ago suggests that scientific research may have reached a 'dead end'. However, investigations are still making gradual progress in gaining new insights.

The distribution of rock art known in England grew slowly between the 1820s and the mid-20th century, then expanded rapidly from the 1970s through regional survey projects carried out by a small number of dedicated amateur enthusiasts. Despite their thorough work, recent surveys in the already intensively studied counties of Durham and Northumberland have identified further exposed examples, suggesting that even more rock art still awaits discovery. The Lake District, where other Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments have been known for many decades, is one area where rock art has only recently been recorded.

As discussed below, associations between rock art and other archaeological remains, even those of much later date, are very important in terms of their potential to advance understanding. Research has generally concentrated on recording and analysis of the motifs that are visible on the surface, whose relationship even to other rock art nearby is seldom clear, but in recent years targeted excavations have made important advances.

For example, at Hunterheugh Crag, overlooking the remote Titlington Burn in Northumberland, part of an outcrop on which rock art was concealed beneath a clearance cairn was excavated in 2003. The underlying outcrop itself proved to have been quarried, probably to obtain flat slabs for use in burial cairns (Figure 8), and in some places new motifs had been carved on the freshly exposed surfaces. By comparison with the earlier motifs, which were heavily weathered, these secondary carvings were deep and well-defined, providing clues as to the long interval that had elapsed between the initial and secondary carvings. Yet some of the later motifs were themselves weathered, indicating that more time elapsed before the start of the agricultural activity that led to the creation of the clearance cairn, probably in the early Bronze Age.

Figure 8
Main Panel at Lordenshaw, Northumberland. Both sides of this outcrop have been lost to medieval or later quarrying.

4 Associations

Most rock art sits isolated in the landscape, without any obvious associations that can be detected from the surface traces: this is part of what makes it so difficult to date and interpret. Recent excavations in Scandinavia, Ireland and Scotland have shown that tools and possible ritual offerings were sometimes deposited around apparently isolated panels, and fires lit, possibly for ceremonial feasting (leaving datable charcoal). For this reason, the immediate environs of rock art panels, where such remains may be preserved, are considered extremely important. Waterlogged ground nearby might also preserve plant remains which may reveal the kind of environments in which rock art panels were sited.

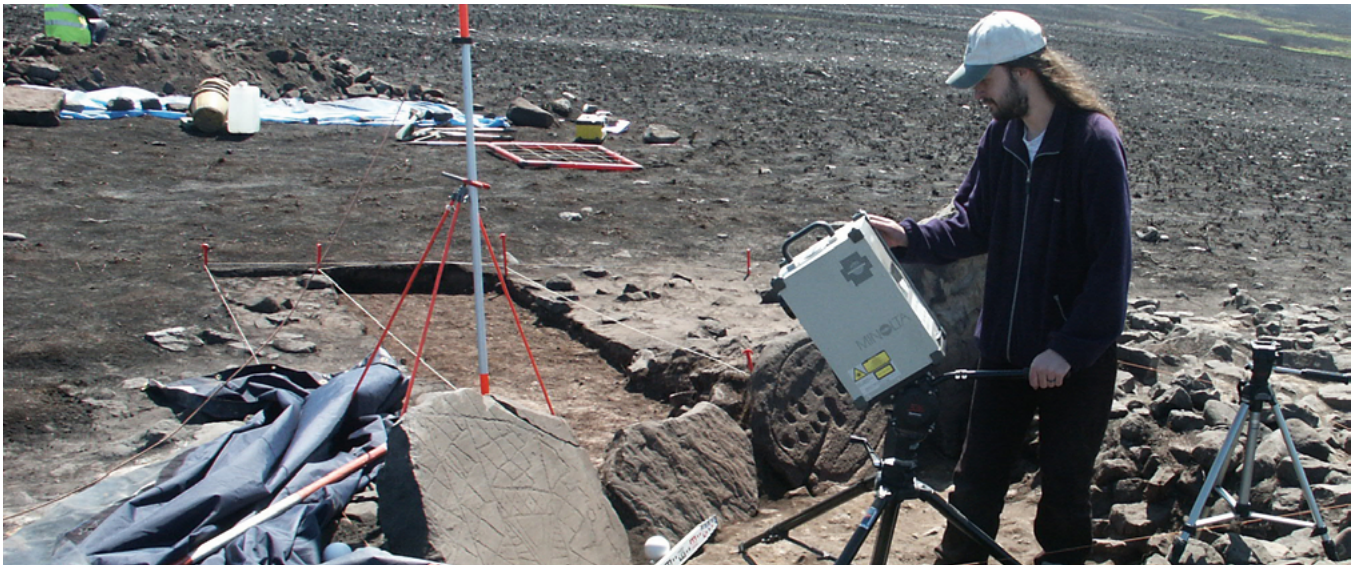


Figure 9
Three adjacent decorated stones (see also Figure 7) used as the kerb of a burial cairn on Fylingdales Moor, North Yorkshire. Laser scanning is in progress; this gives a better-defined image of the incised patterns than conventional photography.

Rock art associated with prehistoric monuments falls into different categories. Portable smaller stones bearing motifs may have been carried from elsewhere to be incorporated into burial cairns, while some rock art on large standing stones was probably carved after the rocks were placed in their monumental setting. This is certainly the case with the complex decoration visible on the large standing stone close to the stone circle known as Long Meg and her Daughters, in Cumbria.

There has been prolonged debate over whether rock art on portable stones is contemporary with the construction of the cairns, or whether motifs that were already ancient were being deliberately selected for re-use in burial monuments. The findings at Hunterheugh Crag, described above, suggest that both scenarios may be valid. It is possible that re-used motifs were chosen purely for their decorative qualities, but many of the incised faces were ultimately turned inwards away from public view, suggesting that they were considered to have some symbolic meaning

Figure 10
A deeply incised cup-and-ring on a boulder within an Iron Age hillfort on Chatton Park Hill, Northumberland. The grooves in the foreground result from medieval or later quarrying.

(which was not necessarily the same meaning that the creators intended).

Sometimes rock art occurs close to, or buried beneath, unconnected remains of later periods (Figure 10). As the excavations at Hunterheugh Crag mentioned above demonstrate, associated prehistoric features are particularly important, because they can help archaeologists to refine dating sequences. Much later features, such as medieval millstone quarries, can also be relevant because they allow archaeologists to estimate the scale of loss, so that the original contexts of rock art can be understood.

The real importance of rock art is its potential to tell us about prehistoric society, through understanding of the circumstances in which it was created and used. Where rock art has been entirely divorced from its original context, for example those stones moved into museum collections, by 19th century antiquarians with the best intentions, its potential to teach us about prehistoric landscape and society is greatly reduced (Figure 11).

Figure 11
Slab in the grounds of York Museum, believed to be one of a pair removed from Staintondale on the North York Moors in the 19th century.

5 Further Reading

The England's Rock Art (ERA) website http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/era/ and the beautifully illustrated booklet that can be downloaded from there offer the most accessible overview of rock art and guide to where individual examples are found. A small number of national overviews have been published (some cited below) and Richard Bradley's 1997 book, *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe: Signing the Land,* puts British rock art into its European context.

Most of the other publications listed below discuss rock art at a regional level.

S Beckensall, *British Prehistoric Rock* Art (1999)

S Beckensall, *Prehistoric Rock Art in Northumberland* (2001)

S Beckensall, *Prehistoric Rock Art in Cumbria* (2001)

S Beckensall, *Circles in Stone. A British Prehistoric Mystery* (2006)

S Beckensall and T Laurie, *Prehistoric Rock Art of County Durham, Swaledale, and Wensleydale* (1998)

M Beresford, *Beyond the Ice: Creswell Crags and its place in a wider European context* (2002)

K Boughey and E Vickerman, *Prehistoric Rock Art of the West Riding. Cup-and-ring-marked rocks of the valleys of the Aire, Wharfe, Washburn and Nidd* (2003)

P and B Brown, *Prehistoric Rock Art in the Northern Dales* (2008)

P Brown and B Chappell, *Prehistoric Rock Art of North Yorkshire* (2005)

A Mazel, G Nash and C Waddington, Art as Metaphor: *The Prehistoric Rock-art of Britain* (2007)

K Sharpe, T Barnett and S Rushton, *The Prehistoric Rock Art of England: Recording, Managing and Enjoying our Carved Heritage* (2008)

A Walker and B Smith, *Rock Art and Ritual* (2008)

6 Where to Get Advice

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7 Acknowledgments

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Figure 3: © Brian Kerr

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