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Rethinking rock art in Iron Age Britain

Introduction

Rock art in Britain is typically carved on boulders and outcrops in the open landscape in northern parts of the country. The precise chronology of the carvings is uncertain, but they are generally thought to have been created and used during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (c.4000-1800 BC). Carved stones and fragments of carved rock outcrops were occasionally incorporated into Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual structures, including funerary and standing stone monuments, and this practice appears to have been deliberate. Although carved stones are subsequently reused in a range of later structures, these relationships are considered coincidental and lacking in meaning. This article discusses the nature of reuse in the British Iron Age (c.800 BC-AD 100 in England and Wales, and 800 BC-AD 400 in Scotland), and suggests that rock art may have been intentionally built into certain Iron Age monuments in ways that were significant and meaningful.

A short biography of British rock art

Britain has a wealth of prehistoric rock art, amounting to over 6,500 carved rocks (or 'panels') and thousands of individual motifs, concentrated mainly across Northern England and Scotland (Figure 1). The carvings form part of a wider Atlantic tradition, often termed Atlantic Rock Art, documented in the island of Ireland, Wales, Portugal, and north-west Spain. Similar prehistoric motifs also occur elsewhere in Europe, notably southern Scandinavia, Denmark and Alpine regions.

The carvings are one of the most intriguing aspects of British prehistory. Commonly described as cup-and-ring markings, they are comprised almost entirely of abstract motifs. Despite the seemingly restricted range of basic motif types – cups, often en-

Figure 1. Distribution map of rock art in England, Scotland, Wales, and Isle of Man. Dark shading = areas of high concentration, light shading = areas of low concentration.

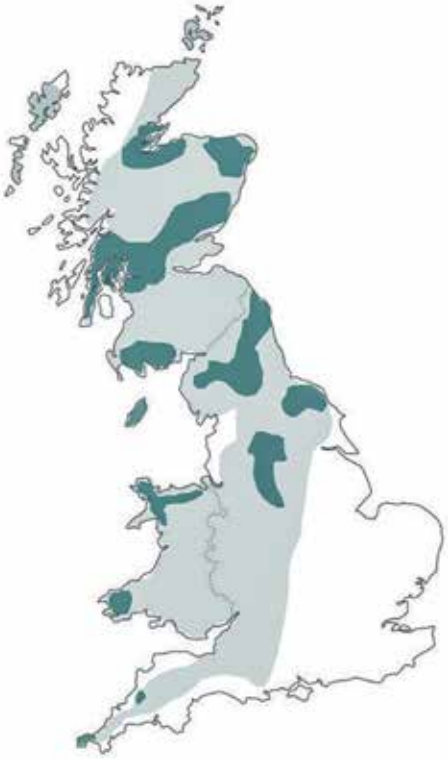

Figure 2. Elaborate cup and ring carvings at Cairnbaan, Kilmartin, Argyll, Scotland. Image: T. Barnett

closed by one or more concentric rings, and grooves – subtle differences in their form, combinations and arrangements on the rock surface, and relationships to natural characteristics of the rock provide immense variation (e.g. Valdez-Tullett 2019). Studies based around the appearance of the rock art tend to distinguish between 'simple' carvings (generally cupmarks or cups encircled by up to three rings), and 'elaborate' carvings that include a greater diversity and complexity of motif types (Figure 2) (e.g. Bradley 1991, 1997; Evans and Dowson 2004).

In the absence of methods for directly dating the carvings, our chronological understanding is derived indirectly from their archaeological contexts and associations. While the majority of carvings are found on natural rock surfaces in the landscape, a small proportion has been incorporated into structures and monuments of known date. Deposition of cup and ring marked stones within Early Bronze Age funerary cairns was originally viewed as evidence that all the carvings were created during this period (e.g. Simpson 1866). This temporal framework has been re-evaluated in recent decades in light of growing awareness of the complex biographies of the carved panels, and closer scrutiny of their relationships with prehistoric monuments (Beckensall and Frodsham 1998; Bradley 1992, 1997; Burgess 1990; Hewitt 1991; Jones 2005, 2007; Morris 1989; Piggott 1972; Simpson and Thawley 1972; Waddington 2007), while excavations at several open-air rock art sites in Northern England and Scotland have strengthened this chronological assessment (Bradley *et al* 2012; Waddington *et al* 2005; Jones *et al* 2011). Current thinking proposes that the motifs were created on natural rock surfaces within the landscape during the Neolithic period, and occasionally carved directly onto stones intended for

deposition within Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ritual structures. A relatively small proportion of carved panels were extracted from their landscape contexts and reused, sometimes with further modification, within Late Neolithic ritual monuments and Early Bronze Age burials cairns.

Although cup and ring motifs were occasionally produced in the Early Bronze Age, principally for use in funerary contexts, inclusion of rock art in Early Bronze Age burial monuments has been argued to signify the metaphorical death of the carving tradition as new ways of understanding the world replaced older beliefs and practices (Beckensall 1998; Beckensall and Frodsham 1998; Bradley 1992, 1997; Burgess 1990). There is some evidence that rock art retained significance into the late 2nd millennium BC in certain parts of Scotland, including repurposing in Middle Bronze Age standing stone monuments such as Ballymeanoch in Kilmartin, Argyll (e.g. Jones *et al* 2011; Sheridan 2012), but its reuse beyond the Bronze Age is generally considered to result from exploitation of locally available building stone, some of which happened to be carved.

Figure 3. Map showing the location of the areas discussed in this article.

Reuse of rock art in Iron Age Britain

The association between cup and ring carvings and certain Iron Age structures, notably hillforts and souterrains, was first commented on in the 19th century (e.g. Simpson 1866). The body of evidence has since grown, and there is now little doubt that Neolithic carvings were frequently reused in the Iron Age (e.g. Hingley 1992; Wainwright 1963; Harding 2012). This raises questions about the nature of reuse. Could the carvings have been used deliberately and, if so, what significance did they hold for Iron Age communities? In the following account, I outline some of the evidence for Iron Age reuse, drawing on examples from hillforts in north-east England and souterrains in south-east Scotland, then discuss how we might determine and interpret intentionality (Figure 3).

Reuse in forts

Hillforts and promontory forts (areas of land, generally on hilltops or promontories, enclosed by concentric earth-and-stone banks and ditches, often with wooden palisades) are characteristic of the Iron Age landscape in Europe. For convenience, I use the term 'fort' here to refer to both hillforts and promontory forts. Generally defined as fortified refuges or defended settlements serving local tribal communities, forts are also thought to have functioned as centres for storage, redistribution, trade, and ceremony (e.g. Cunliffe 2005; Harding 2012). Evidence for a ceremonial purpose includes the presence of structures interpreted as shrines or ritual enclosures within forts, and ritualised human and animal burials in their encircling ditches and interior pits (e.g. Hingley 1992; Harding 2012). As Harding (2012: 127) notes 'a ritual dimension was endemic in all hillforts' and some of the

smaller forts may have had a predominately ceremonial role.

The proportion of all 3,600 Iron Age forts[1] in England, Scotland and Wales known to include carved stones has not been quantified precisely, but a broad assessment of the data indicates that it is likely to total no more than 1%. A different pattern emerges at a regional scale of analysis, and I focus here specifically on the relationship between rock art and Iron Age forts in the county of Northumberland, north-east England (Figure 3). There are 217 hillforts and promontory forts documented in Northumberland, of which around 12% are spatially associated with cup and ring carvings (Lock and Ralston 2017). This is a significant proportion, considering that many of the forts are located in areas with negligible rock art, notably the Cheviot Hills. In a number of cases, the rock art has been uncovered during excavation, and there may be many unexcavated forts containing prehistoric carvings.

Cup and ring carvings associated with Iron Age forts are typically found in two types of context: within or beneath the ramparts, or within a few meters of an entrance or exit. Different types of carvings are typically used in each of these contexts. Carvings occurring within or beneath the ramparts tend to feature simple motifs (cupmarks or, more rarely, cups with one or two rings), whereas those located at entrances are elaborate, and often include unusual motifs. For example, Dod Law West Camp in north Northumberland features an area of exposed sandstone bedrock with cup and ring carvings a few meters outside the eastern entrance to the hillfort. The panel is covered in complex engravings, including several sub-rectangular motifs enclosing multiple cupmarks which are unique to this panel (Figure 4a and b) (Beckensall 1999). We find

Figure 4a. Rectilinear 'cup and ring' motifs on a panel situated 5m from the entrance to Dod Law hillfort, Northumberland. The outer earthworks of the hillfort are visible in the right of the photograph. Image: T. Barnett

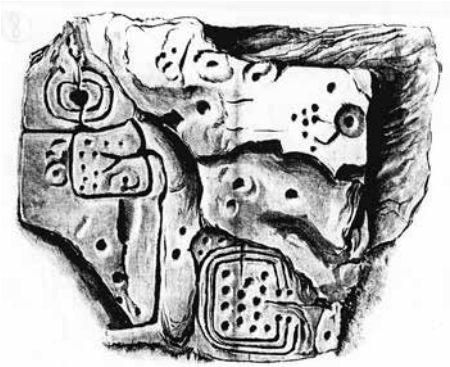

Figure 4b. 19th century drawing of carvings at Dod Law (after Bruce 1869).

a similar spatial relationship at Old Bewick Camp, a few miles to the north. Here, a large, conspicuous rock (Old Bewick 1b) featuring multiple, well-preserved cup and ring motifs is positioned a few metres outside the outer enclosure bank of the hillfort, directly in line with its eastern entrance (Figures 5a and 5b). Interestingly, one of the motifs appears to be a natural depression which has been encircled by a carved ring. People entering or leaving the fort would have passed the rock, and would have been able to see and touch the carvings. There is a second prominent rock (Old Bewick 1a) in this location, about 15m from the hillfort's outer entrance (see Figures 5a and 5b). The rock's upper surface is entirely covered with elaborate carvings and natural weathering channels and, unusually, a row of cupmarks running horizontally along two of its vertical faces (Figure 6). The rock, which rises to a height of almost 2m and measures roughly 4x5m, can be seen from a considerable

Figure 5a. Large carved rock (Old Bewick 1b) situated 6m from the entrance to a small D-shaped enclosure and hillfort at Old Bewick. The low earthworks of the enclosure are in the foreground. A second large carved rock (Old Bewick 1a) is visible in the left of the photograph, approximately 15m away. Image: T. Barnett

Figure 5b. Carved surface of Old Bewick 1b. Old Bewick 1a is in the background to the left. Image: T. Barnett

Figure 6. Elaborate motifs and natural weathering channels on the upper surface of Old Bewick 1a. Image: T. Barnett

distance and would have been highly visible to people approaching and leaving the hillfort. Further north in Northumberland is Roughting Linn, the largest and arguably most elaborate carved rock surviving in England (Figure 7). It is positioned adjacent to an impressive promontory fort enclosed by five concentric stone-and-earth banks. Significantly, the carved rock is situated a few metres from the fort's south-eastern entrance. The surface of the rock is naturally sculpted by deep weathering channels and carved with numerous elaborate and unusual motifs. The monumental scale of the panel, which rises 3.5m above present ground levels and covers around 300m2, makes it an imposing landmark. It is highly likely that people using the fort were aware of the rock and its carvings, and may have viewed their association with the fort as important.

In certain instances, carved rocks are situated within the interior of a fort. An example of this relationship can be seen at the small hillfort of Chatton Camp in north Northumberland. The earthworks enclose a prominent carved outcrop located a few metres inside the fort's single entrance (Figure 8a). The rock is carved with elaborate motifs, including a wide basin, and a symmetrical serpentine groove partially encircling two conjoined cup and ring motifs, which gives the rock a vaguely anthropomorphic appearance (Figure 8b). Symmetrical serpentine grooves are rare in British open-air rock art, but more typical of Neolithic Passage Tomb Art. One of the few known serpentine grooves not associated with a Passage Tomb is located within an Iron Age context, discussed below.

The relationship between cup and ring carvings and Iron Age forts appears to be carefully structured. The carvings are either hidden beneath a fort's enclosing earthworks, or located at its threshold. As the carved rocks positioned at entrances are invariably fixed or immoveable, it is could be argued that the forts were deliberately orientated with respect to the panels, perhaps to ensure that they were encountered by people passing in and out.

Reuse in souterrains

Souterrains (sometimes termed 'earth-houses' or 'Pict's houses') are subterranean or partly subterranean corridor-like structures, generally associated with Iron Age round houses or settlements in parts of Atlantic Europe. They are relatively frequent in Scotland and Ireland, but unknown in England except in the far south west. Souterrains were constructed throughout the Iron Age, although their dates and styles are regionally varied (e.g. Wainwright 1963;

Figure 7. Large sandstone outcrop with elaborate carvings at Roughting Linn, located 10m outside the south-east entrance to a promontory fort. Image: T. Barnett

Miket 2002). The Scottish souterrains are characterised by a single curving, banana-shaped corridor (Figure 9a). Some are more complex, with lateral corridors or chambers interconnecting with the central corridor. The corridors were dug into the ground,

Figure 8a. Carved sandstone outcrop located a few metres inside the entrance to a small hillfort at Chatton Camp. The inner earthworks of the hillfort are visible behind the rock. Image: T. Barnett

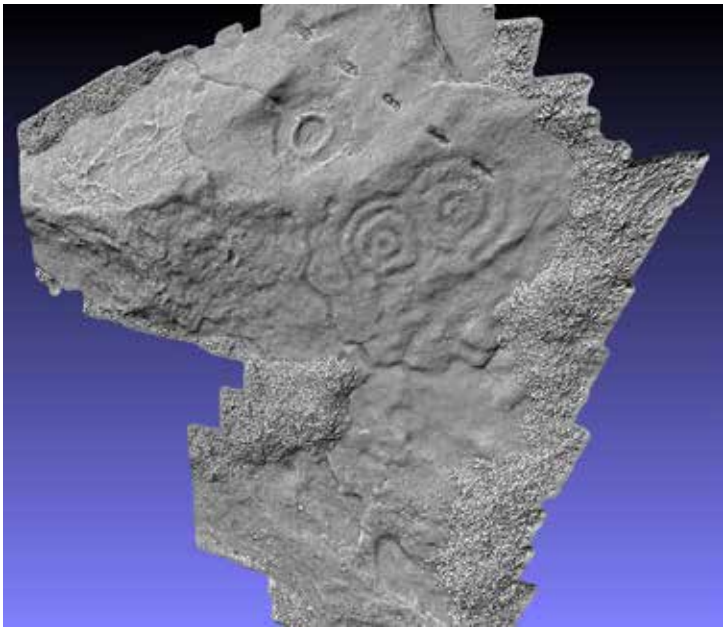

Figure 8b. Screen shot of a 3D model of the Chatton Camp carved rock showing a symmetrical serpentine groove, and cups with multiple rings. A line of rectilinear quarrying marks runs along the top of the rock. The model was created in Agisoft Metashape and rendered in Meshlab.

then lined and roofed with stone slabs or wood, before being reburied (Figure 9b). They were generally accessed from the adjacent hut or settlement via a short flight of steps and a narrow entrance situated close to one end of the corridor.

The purpose of souterrains is uncertain, and they may have served several different functions. Traditional explanations include their use as food stores, or as hiding places for the local community during troubled times (e.g. Wainwright 1963) but, as they tend to be damp, narrow, and usually have a single entrance, they seem ill-designed for these functions. An alternative view is that they had a primarily ceremonial role, possibly connected with chthonic beliefs and rituals (e.g. Page 2015). Their dark, subterranean nature is redolent of caves or tombs, and some are built into the remains of Late Neolithic chambered cairns. Material remains recovered from within souterrains include human inhumations, cremated bone, animal bones, stone figurines, and what appear to be structured deposits of fragments of pottery, rotary querns, iron slag, and metal and bone objects, more indicative of ritual practices than domestic activities (e.g. Page 2015).

Of the 930 probable souterrains currently documented in Scotland, around 1% contain prehistoric carved stones[2]. While this statistic seems low, it is equivalent to the estimated proportion of Early Bronze Age burial cairns in Britain that incorporate rock art (Burgess 1990). There are distinct regional variations in the proportion of souterrains incorporating rock art. For instance, of the 169 souterrains recorded in Perthshire in central Scotland, none contain prehistoric carvings, although more than 800 rock art panels are known in the same region[3]. The county of Angus in south-east Scotland contains 96 rock art panels and 117 confirmed souterrains (Figure 3). Nine of these 'Angus-type souterrains' (7.7% of the total in this area) are known to include cup and ring marked rocks. Again, this is not a high proportion but it is significantly larger than the average. Given that many of the structures are badly preserved, it is possible that the percentage containing

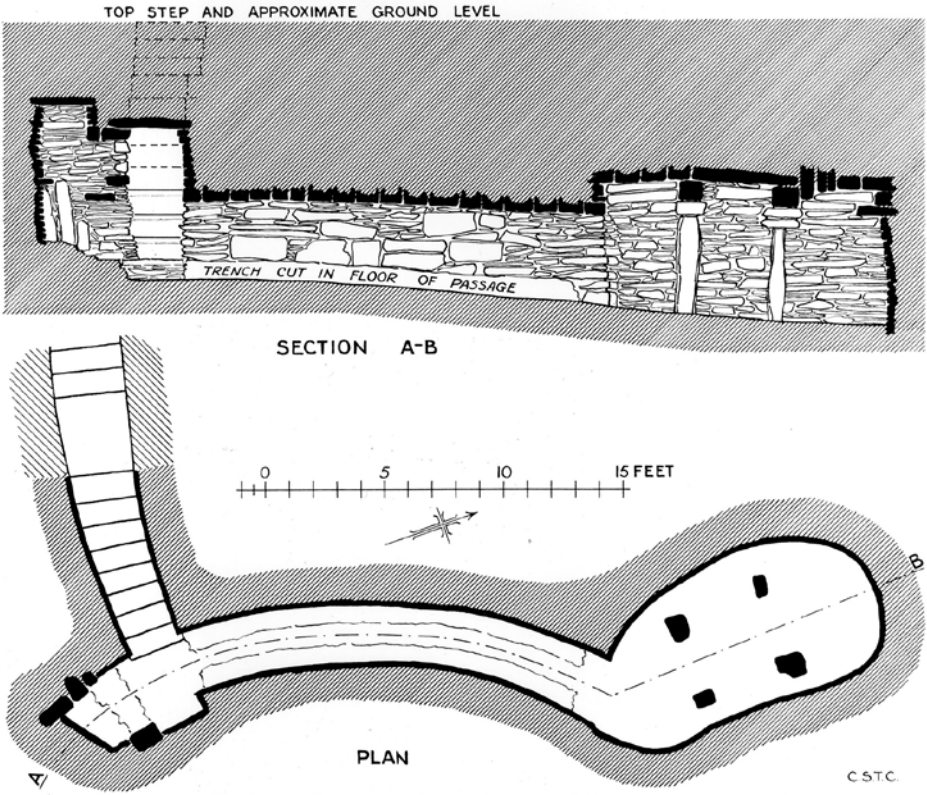

Figure 9a. Plan and section drawing of Grainbank souterrain, Orkney. SC336487© Crown Copyright: HES.

rock art was originally higher. A number of the souterrains have been excavated and, in some cases, partly reconstructed. In the more intact structures, the carved rocks have been used as roofing slabs and in the stone walls lining the passages. Some of the motifs are broken or weathered, as if removed from larger carved rock surfaces that had been previously exposed in the open landscape. Interestingly, a similar observation has been cited as evidence for deliberate reuse for rock art in Early Bronze Age burial cairns (e.g. Simpson and Thawley 1972).

Although the evidence is somewhat limited, we can discern a consistent pattern in the position of carved stones within the Angus type souterrains. They are located at specific points – immediately inside the entrance, in the central section of the corridor where it curves away from the entrance, at junctions between corridors, and at the ends of terminal end of the corridor (Williamson 2013). The complexity of the motifs varies in different parts of the souterrain. Elaborate carvings tend to be placed at entrances, central points, and junctions, whereas simple cupmarked stones are used at the ends of corridors. At Tealing, for example, a stone decorated with several cupmarks, cup and ring motifs, and a cup with four rings is built into the wall directly inside the entrance to the souterrain (Figure 10a and b). The Pitcur souterrain complex includes two elaborately carved stones positioned in the lower wall coursing at the point where lateral corridors join the central

Figure 9b. Photo montage of the stone-lined corridor of Newmill souterrain, Angus. SC370240 © HES.

corridor. In the Barns of Airlie souterrain, the large, central capstone features several linear grooves, and two symmetrical serpentine grooves ending in cupmarks (Figure 11) (RCAHMS 1983: 29). As noted above, symmetrical serpentine grooves are virtually unknown in Scotland's open-air rock art, and rare in Britain as a whole. One of the few other examples recorded in Britain is located within Chatton Camp hillfort, mentioned previously, suggesting that this motif may have held particular relevance for Iron Age communities. Elaborate carved stones have also been used in souterrain entrances, as central roofing stones, and in walls at Ruthven, Letham Grange, Hurly Hawkin, Newmill, and possibly Pitcur (MacRitchie 1900; Simpson 1866; Taylor 1982; Watkins 1980; Williamson 2013). The Hurly Hawkin souterrain has a simple cup marked stone located at its terminal end, following a pattern repeated elsewhere in Scotland (Taylor 1982). In general, the carved surfaces of the stones are turned inwards towards the souterrain's interior, although there is an interesting exception to this trend at Letham Grange, where one of the wall stones is carved on both sides with elaborate motifs (Figure 12). In this instance, the more complex carved surface faced towards the interior (Simpson 1866; Wainwright 1963).

When people entered the souterrain, they would have been able to see the carvings near the entrance in natural light, but visibility would have decreased on moving along the corridor (Williamson 2013). The corridor's curve effectively blocks any daylight filtering in through the entrance from reaching the far end of the souterrain. Motifs furthest from the entrance would have been evident only with artificial light and sense of touch. The contrast between light and dark may have been deliberately manipulated to heighten the visual and tactile impact of the carvings and their contextual significance within the structure.

Figure 10a. View into the Tealing souterrain showing the position of an elaborate carved stone built into the wall just inside the narrow entrance. Image: T. Barnett

Figure 10b. Detail of the carved stone in the Tealing souterrain with elaborate motifs. Image: T. Barnett

Figure 11. Carved stone with symmetrical serpentine grooves, linear grooves, and cupmarks, used as a capstone in the Barns of Airlie souterrain. SC145132 © Crown Copyright: HES.

Light and touch may have been used in other Iron Age contexts to affect how Light and touch may have been used in other Iron Age contexts to affect how carved motifs were viewed and experienced. For instance, a cup-marked stone is positioned within a small niche in the entrance to Tappoch Broch, an Iron Age monument at Torwood near Stirling in southern Scotland (Morris 1981). The motifs are not easily visible and are best experienced by feeling inside the niche. Elsewhere in southern Scotland, excavations at the Iron Age hillfort of Traprain Law, East Lothian, have revealed a round-hut constructed over carved bedrock (Armit and McCartney 2005). The carvings are elaborate and comprise a number of unusual motifs, including at least five cup and rings, small rosettes, lozenges, and chevrons. Like serpentine grooves, some of

Figure 12. Two elaborately carved surfaces on opposing sides of a stone from Letham Grange souterrain (after Simpson 1866, Plate XX). © Courtesy of HES (Reproduced with kind permission from Society of Antiquaries of Scotland).

these symbols are more commonly associated with Passage Tombs. The excavators note that the most complex carvings are situated close to the hut's hearth (Armit and McCartney 2005). Although faint, the motifs are likely to have been visible and animated in the flickering firelight. The positioning of the hut in relation to the rock art has been interpreted as fortuitous, but it could equally be argued that this arrangement was intended, to ensure that the carvings could be experienced by people within the hut. Many other unusual carvings (now removed) are associated with this hillfort, and there is evidence that the site has a long and complex biography (e.g. Curle 1921). It appears to have been used as a ritual centre and burial place in the Neolithic and Bronze Age before the first fortifications were constructed in the Late Bronze Age, and it may have been regarded by the Iron Age occupants as a place imbued with ancient power.

Determining intentionality

Although there are numerous cases where Neolithic carved stones have been included in Iron Age contexts, a few of which I have outlined in this article, the practice is generally considered to have been unintentional. As Burgess (1990: 22) puts it, 'these decorated stones were convenient building material, no more, no less.' If reuse was indeed purely coincidental, we would expect the carved rocks and other building stone to have been sourced from the immediate vicinity of the Iron Age structures. We would also expect their placement within the Iron Age structures to be entirely random. The first of these points could, in theory, be tested through petrological graphic analysis of the carved stones relative to the local geology. Such analysis would be informative, but would not rule out the possibility that carved stones were reused from Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age monuments situated near the Iron Age structure, having already been transported for inclusion in these earlier contexts. Another approach is to assess the proximity of areas with carved rocks that could conceivably have been the source of reused material. Spatial analysis of the relationship between the Angus-type souterrains and rock art shows that cup and ring carvings in this region tend to be concentrated on higher ground flanking wide, fertile river valleys, whereas the souterrains are generally low-lying within river valleys and on the coastal plain (Figure 13) (Williamson 2013). There is no rock art in a primary context closer than around 2km to a souterrain, and in most cases the carvings are situated more than 3-4km away. This seems a considerable distance to transport building material when other sources were readily available close by, and suggests deliberate procurement of carved stones from specific places in the landscape. Attempts to reconstruct the prehistoric landscape are inconclusive, however, not least because all locally available rock art may have been removed for inclusion in Iron Age structures or by later land-use and development. Nevertheless, in Angus there appears to be a discrepancy in the locations preferred for cup and ring carvings, and those used for souterrains, suggesting that rock art extraction was targeted and significant.

This brings us to the second point mentioned above. If reuse of cup and ring markings was entirely coincidental, there would be no pattern in how they were placed within Iron Age monuments. In this brief account, I have drawn attention to certain consistencies in the architectural relationship between rock art and Iron Age structures. As we have seen, the carvings are primarily associated with structures that have both domestic and ritual dimensions. Within these structures, the carvings are positioned either in hidden or partially obscured contexts, or in liminal places such as thresholds. Those that are not buried within earthworks always have the carved surface turned towards the living. Different types of carvings are deposited in particular contexts – simple motifs in less visible locations, and elaborate motifs at junctions and thresholds. While the evidence cited here is neither comprehensive nor conclusive, the careful structuring of the carvings within forts and souterrains offers a compelling argument for deliberate reuse.

Figure 13. Google Earth satellite image of Angus, south-east Scotland, showing the spatial relationship between known rock art panels (white dots) and the souterrains mentioned in the text (white squares). Data from Canmore (www.canmore.org.uk) and Scotland's Rock Art Project (www.rockart.scot).

A similar argument has been applied to determine intentional reuse of Neolithic rock art within Early Bronze Age burial cairns (Beckensall and Frodsham 1998; Bradley 1992). The placement of cup and ring carvings in these monuments appears to be carefully ordered and selective. Elaborate carvings were used preferentially for cist covers and kerb stones, whilst simple cup-marked stones were deposited in the cairn material, with the carved surfaces typically orientated towards the deceased (Bradley 1992). There are parallels between the configuration of rock art in both Early Bronze Age burials and Iron Age monuments, so if we accept the reasoning for intentionality in the Early Bronze Age, then we should consider that comparable arguments may be relevant for the Iron Age.

Shifting values

As we have seen, the structured deposition of cup and ring carvings in Iron Age forts and souterrains could indicate that the carvings were considered significant, and their reuse was deliberate and meaningful. Determining the motives for reuse is a more challenging proposition or, as Bradley (1992: 171) remarks, 'it is one thing to identify a structure in the selection and re-use of carved stones and quite another to provide an interpretation'. There has been limited discussion on this theme for the Iron Age. Arguments that the carvings were selected and displayed simply for their aesthetic value neglect the fact that many are buried or partially hidden (e.g. Sherriff 1995; Waddington 2007). Where deliberate reuse is seen as a possibility, at least in souterrains, the carvings are suggested to have had a ritual function, or communicated ritual knowledge (e.g. Armit 1999; Hingley 1992; Williamson 2013).

Reuse rarely implies continuity of specific meanings. Monuments, places, and objects are continually recycled and reinvented and, while their new meanings can be shaped by their earlier life-histories, they can also be remote from them. In more general discourse on the significance of the past in the past, reuse of older monuments, artefacts, and burials is frequently viewed as a means of legitimising social change (e.g. Bradley 2002; Hingley 1996; Gosden and Lock 1998; Driscoll 1988, 1998; Williams 1998). These accounts propose that emerging political, social or ideological structures were sanctioned through the construction of historical or mythical relationships with the past. Studies of reuse of Southern Scandinavian Bronze Age rock carvings in the Iron

Age offer an alternative interpretation in which the past may, at times, have been unwanted, or even feared (e.g. Nilsson 2010). From this perspective, rock art sites held negative, as well as positive, connotations for Iron Age people, and their ritualised reuse served to appease potentially malevolent forces (Nilsson 2010).

Accounts of how the past was perceived in Iron Age Britain propose that people were imitating Neolithic pottery, and deliberately placing items within Neolithic burial structures (Hingley 1996; Ross 1994). It is also suggested that the architecture of Iron Age huts and souterrains was inspired by Neolithic chambered tombs and ritual monuments (Hingley 1996). Reinventing and redefining earlier material culture may indicate an interest in establishing a dialogue with the past, which Hingley sees as a desire to 'project the identity of a lineage through association with ancestors' (Hingley 1992: 241).

Iron Age reuse of cup and ring carvings could be viewed within this broader framework of a Neolithic 'revival'. The carvings are easily accessible within and on the margins of land that was intensively settled and farmed in later prehistory. Over time, many carved panels may have become obscured by vegetation or erosion, but others, particularly those with elaborate motifs and on conspicuous rocks, would have been clearly evident. These would have formed part of the everyday landscapes known intimately by local communities. Although, by the Iron Age, direct historical links to the people that made and used the rock art may have been lost, it is conceivable that social knowledge of the carvings persisted, as indeed it did into later periods. Awareness of the antiquity of the carvings may have been important in how they were perceived by successive generations. Furthermore, if some carvings were situated in places of particular local significance, they may have acquired specific meanings through their connection to these locations.

Unlike monuments, artefacts, and figurative rock art, the distinction between cup and ring carvings and natural features on rock surfaces in the open landscape is not always obvious. The abstract motifs can resemble and often intersect with natural hollows, depressions, and weathering channels (Figure 14). The carvings, and natural features associated with them, may have been considered to embody supernatural forces, and to be imbued with potency (e.g. Bradley 2000; Jones 2007; Tilley 2008; Sharpe 2022). Interestingly, uncarved rocks with distinctive natural features are also used occasionally in Iron Age contexts, and their placement follows a similar pattern to those of carved stones. Lordenshaw hillfort in south Northumberland, for example, has a large, upright stone positioned directly in line with the fort's main entrance, a few meters outside its outer earthwork. The stone is uncarved, but its upper surface is sculpted by deep weathering channels comparable to those on carved rocks outside the entrances of other Northumberland forts, including those mentioned above at Roughting Linn and Old Bewick. The deliberate placement of the Lordenshaw stone could imply that it was perceived as significant and regarded in the same way as carved stones. Similarly, stones with natural cup-like depressions have been incorporated into several souterrains, although the evidence is not sufficient to reconstruct their precise location within the monuments (Williamson 2013).

It is particularly noteworthy that Iron Age reuse of cup and ring carvings brought the rock art into direct contact with people by incorporating it into structures that were central to their domestic and ceremonial lives (Hingley 1992). Rather than being feared, the carvings appear to have played an important role in the everyday activities associated with settlements. The Iron Age is thought to be a time of social and political uncertainty, set within a context of environmental instability (e.g. Cunliffe 2005; Harding 2012; van Geel and Berglund 2000). Agricultural intensification and extensive deforestation in many parts of Britain transformed how the landscape was understood

Figure 14. Eroded cup and ring motifs and deep weathering channels at Roughting Linn, Northumberland. Image: T. Barnett

and managed (Tipping 1997). In light of these changes, there may have been a need to draw on ancient powers. If the carved rocks were considered to have potency, situating them within domestic and ceremonial spheres of activity could have served to harness their power for the benefit of the living. There are possible analogies here with other forms of Iron Age deposition in hillforts and souterrains. What appears to be the ritualised placement of human, animal, and material remains within the ditches of some Iron Age hillforts and the corridors of some souterrains could be synonymous with the act of burying carved rocks within and beneath the banks encircling forts, or obscuring them in the dark interiors of souterrains. Ritual deposition of powerful things in these contexts may have had an apotropaic function which served to protect places important to local communities, as well as the communities themselves.

Conclusion

The initial view that all British rock art was produced in the Early Bronze Age has been revisited in recent decades, leading to recognition that the carvings were created and used principally during the Neolithic and, to a lesser extent, the Early Bronze Age, with their meanings changing over time and in different contexts. The impetus for producing carvings appears to have faded in the Early Bronze Age, although rock art may have continued to be significant into the later Bronze Age (e.g. Jones et al 2011, Sheridan 2012). Despite considerable evidence for subsequent reuse, the practice is considered coincidental and lacking in meaning after the Bronze Age. In this article, I have challenged this view, suggesting that the carvings have a more complex past, and were intentionally deposited within Iron Age structures.

Inclusion of rock art in Iron Age structures appears to be regionally diverse, and I have focused in this account on two areas of eastern Britain (north-east England and south-east Scotland) where the phenomenon is most pronounced. Studies of Early Bronze Age reuse suggest that cup and ring carvings retained significance in eastern parts of Britain after the Neolithic, but their value diminished in western areas as new forms of symbolism spread from Ireland and the Atlantic region (Haddingham 1974; Evans and Dowson 2004). While it seems unlikely that the original meanings of the motifs persisted for hundreds of years into the Iron Age, knowledge of the carvings may have endured in the oral traditions and practices of communities in eastern areas. Rather than fading into obscurity, the carvings in these areas may have continued as fixed points of reference within a changing landscape. Over time, they perhaps acquired new values, shaped by specific social

needs and perceptions. Re-contextualising the carvings within structures important to Iron Age communities may have served to harness their embodied potency in new ways that benefitted those communities.

I would like to end with a brief comment on engagement with the carvings in later periods. Aside from Hingley's (1992: 29) cautious suggestion that rock art production could have continued during the Iron Age, the notion that the tradition of creating cup and ring carvings survived anywhere in Britain beyond the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age has been rejected (e.g. Burgess 1990; Sherriff 1995; Wainwright 1963). This dismissal may be misleading. A number of rocks in Iron Age contexts have unusual motifs or features that do not fit easily within the typical repertoire of cup and ring carvings in the landscape. Some of these anomalies are stylistically and technically distinct from the other motifs on the rock surface, and give the impression of different authorship. We could perhaps consider that Iron Age reuse was not just restricted to incorporating Neolithic rock art into significant structures, but also involved interaction with and modification of the carved rock surfaces.

Acknowledgements
This article is dedicated to Gerhard Milstreu and his remarkable achievements. I am indebted to Gerhard for fuelling my interest in Scandinavian rock art, and for introducing me to the Tanum frottage technique. I am truly grateful to Gerhard, Ellen Meyer, and many other colleagues for fascinating and informative visits to Tanum. The comments in this article are based on my experiences and observations during the Northumberland Durham Rock Art Project and, more recently, during the Scotland's Rock Art Project. My thanks goes to all those that have contributed to and inspired the work of these projects.

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Notes

[1] Data from the Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland: https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/
[2] Data from Canmore, the online database of Scotland's Historic Environment Record: www.canmore.org.uk
[3] Data from Scotland's Rock Art Project www.rockart.scot

This article is reprinted with corrections from the book chapter of the same title contained within Dodd, J. and Meijer, E. (eds.) (2018) Giving the Past a Future. Essays in Archaeology and Rock Art Studies in Honour of Dr. Phil. h.c. Gerhard Milstreu. Oxford: Archaeopress. The volume is part of the Access Archaeology series, which supports publications that fall between conventional models, especially where funding is limited. Titles can be purchased in print form or freely downloaded for personal use from the Archaeopress website.

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