

The term 'rock art' is both misleading and precise. It refers to a range of motifs from simple dots to elaborate circular designs pecked into natural surfaces between about 3000 and 2000 BC. The choice of stone as a medium is essential and most designs were made on roughly horizontal exposures. But was this art? That is a more difficult question and there is nothing to suggest that it was a medium of aesthetic self-expression, as so much art is today. Worse still, with the exception of a very few drawings of Bronze Age daggers and axes, none of its elements can be identified with features of the familiar world. In that sense it seems to be entirely abstract.

The nature of British and Irish rock art probably changed over time and so did the character of individual panels. The earliest 'designs' were probably the simple circular depressions known as cup marks. They may have been among the latest too, and in some areas, they could have retained their significance for a long time. It was during the earlier third millennium BC that rock art was most abundant and ornate. The simple cup marks were enclosed by rings – sometimes many concentric rings – and these designs were often linked together to create extensive panels. A few designs were buried beneath small cairns, but they are comparatively rare at the sites of monuments and are normally found in comparative isolation. It seems likely that individual panels were built up over time, but it is unusual for any elements to be superimposed. More often fragments of already decorated rock were taken away and reused in the stone coffins or cists associated with Early Bronze Age burials. By that stage they may have been antiquities in their own right, although the patterns must have retained their significance as certain motifs were selected at the expense of others. There is no evidence that existing designs were changed when that happened.

Those designs were made by pecking the rock with a stone hammer or chisel. There is no evidence that metal tools were used to make them, and when the surface of rock was freshly broken the motifs would have been a different

colour from the surface of the rock. It seems unlikely that any of them were painted. In some cases, individual panels incorporated geological features of the stone – fissures, cracks, basins and mineral veins. They became an integral part of the composition. Other elements may have been equally important. Certain decorated surfaces glitter in strong light; the designs are particularly striking after rain; and different surfaces are best viewed as the sun illuminates different surfaces at particular times of day.

Although it is impossible to recreate the original meanings of these designs, their associations provide certain clues. They were applied to specialised monuments, often those associated with death and the supernatural; they are commoner (and often more ornate) in the vicinity of monuments like henges; and a few elements resemble designs associated with Irish passage tombs. Although their meanings are lost, they were obviously significant for their distribution extends into Atlantic Europe where strikingly similar designs are found in north-west Spain and northern Portugal. The resemblance between them is too striking for this to be coincidental.

The distribution of ancient rock art in Britain and Ireland is partly an accident of survival. Some of the decorated surfaces are more resilient than others, so that the designs can still be recognised. That is one reason why there are concentrations of decorated surfaces in County Donegal and County Kerry in Ireland, Mid Argyll, Perthshire and Galloway in Scotland, and Northumberland, Cumbria and the North York Moors in England. Among the best places to visit are Ilkley Moor (West Yorkshire) and Kilmartin Glen (Scotland). Within the main concentrations of rock art, the decorated surfaces are covered by elaborate curvilinear designs, but groups of cup marks seem to predominate in northern Scotland, Wales and south-west England.

They have been recorded in an increasingly sophisticated manner, but few sites have seen any excavation. Where it has happened, it has found deposits of worked and broken quartz and

a few non-local artefacts. Most were distributed around the decorated surface, but others had been placed in cracks or fissures on top of the rock itself. There are signs of compacted or cobbled surfaces where people may have gathered and it has long been recognised that many of these places were located at viewpoints, although there is seldom any evidence of the ancient environment. It is possible that some of the major rock art sites were outside the main areas of settlement, perhaps in places that were visited occasionally or in the course of seasonal land use.

Even if rock art remains an enigma, it has gained a new prominence through the fieldwork of the last twenty years. It poses a challenge but remains an absorbing field of study. It is also one that has engaged the interest of local groups whose discoveries still provide the basis for research. That is likely to continue.

Further Reading

Bradley, R. 1997. *Rock Art and the Prehistory of Atlantic Europe*. London: Routledge

Beckensall, S. 1999. *British Prehistoric Rock Art*. Stroud: Tempus

Jones, A.M. et al. 2011. *An Animate Landscape. Rock Art and the Prehistory of Kilmartin, Argyll, Scotland*. Oxford: Windgather



Photo 1: A cup mark with multiple rings situated on the slopes of the Ben Lawers mountain range in the southern Highlands of Scotland. (Photo: Aaron Watson).



Photo 2: Cup and ring markings at Nether Largie, a group of standing stones within the monumental landscape of Kilmartin Glen in western Scotland. (Photo: Aaron Watson).



Photo 3: The carvings at Copt Howe in the Lake District have affinities with Irish passage tomb art. The circular hollows are geological, but Neolithic people might have interpreted them to be cup marks. (Photo: Aaron Watson).

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