



Issue No. 21: October 2019

Dear All,

It seems a long time since the last Rock Articles but hopefully worth the wait, and this issue happily coincides with European Rock Art Day (#EuropeanRockArtDay) on 9th October. British and Irish rock art research continues to move forwards, and this year's BRAG conference included plenty of 'local' papers as well as a providing perspective from India and South Africa. Efforts to maintain access to the valuable but now-unsupported ERA database continue. In previous issues we reported on new links with the Megalithic Portal; now, excellent work by Richard Stroud has ensured that the 3D models will live on in Sketchfab. We also bring news of projects in Scotland and Ireland, and an unusual take on a modern form of rock art at CGHQ!

Hope to see some Rock Articles readers in Carlisle at the *Northern Prehistory: Connected Communities* conference – see back page for details.

Kate

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BRITISH & IRISH ROCK ART HEADLINES: projects, publications, and people

-  Scotland's Rock Art Project passes half-way point with 150 participants trained and 800 panels recorded. (See page 2)
-  Discoveries continue across County Kerry. (See page 4)
-  New Sketchfab site launched providing access to 3D models from England's Rock Art Archive:
<https://sketchfab.com/EnglandsRockArt> (See page 5)
-  New publication on portable art: Meirion Jones, A. & Díaz-Guardamino, M. 2019. *Making a mark: image and process in Neolithic Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
-  Rock art at Tullie House Museum in Carlisle gets new protection and interpretation as part of a revamp of the Prehistory Gallery. Go along to the conference on 12 and 13th October to have a look!
-  Excavations at Copt Howe, Cumbria published: Bradley, R., Watson, A., and Style, P. 2019. *After the axes. The rock art at Copt Howe, north-west England, and the Neolithic sequence at Great Langdale. Proc. of the Prehistoric Soc: 1-16.*
-  New sketchfab site by Hugo Anderson Whymark showing carved stone balls:
<https://sketchfab.com/hugoandersonwhymark/collections/perth-museum-and-art-gallery>

Listening Stones

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Rock art is a living tradition in many parts of the world, and it sometimes turns up in unexpected places. Just such an occurrence is in the shadow of GCHQ, the UK government's top-secret communications centre that eavesdrops on conversations across the world from its headquarters on the outskirts of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire. As part of a large-scale refurbishment of the site, locally known as 'The Doughnut' because of its ring-wall of offices around a large central courtyard, the Carlisle-born artist Gordon Young (Young 2019a) was commissioned to create a piece of installation art in the public park outside the northeastern entrance (Postcode: GL51 0XL; NGR: SO 917225). The work was crafted in collaboration with Why Not Associates (typography) and Russell Coleman (implementation), and funded by GCHQ in cooperation with Cheltenham Borough Council Public Art Panel (Young 2019b).

Completed in 2004, the work entitled 'Listening Stones' comprises nine glacial rolled granite boulders, most more than 2m tall. To archaeological eyes their arrangement looks like a classic late Neolithic style stone row and circle of 'lollipop' plan. Four stones are set in line over a distance of about 70m, orientated broadly southwest to northeast (Figure 1). The most northerly stone also lies on the circumference of the stone circle, completed with five other widely spaced stones forming a ring about 20m across (Figure 2). A dedicatory inscription cut into the polished face of an additional stone—sliced in half—stands immediately east of the circle. The contrast between the linear and the circular is strong, although the two elements are clearly joined. And within a municipal-parkland setting criss-crossed with paths and surrounded by trees, lamp-posts, and benches the whole piece has an interesting ambiance resonating with feelings of an ancient order in a modern world.

*'an
ancient
order in a
modern
world'*



Figure 1. The stone row forming the linear element of the Listening Stones, Cheltenham, looking northeast.



Figure 2. The stone circle at the northeastern end of the Listening Stones, Cheltenham, looking west.

*'encrypted
messages,
mysterious
symbols'*

Some of the stones have been cut or roughly shaped, although each retains its original form, and effective use is made of their natural colouration and textures in siting the motifs. Each stone has been carved and lettered, some with coloured in-fill, to reflect different forms of communication: codes, ciphers, algebra, encrypted messages, mysterious symbols, and recognisable written languages from across the world. Some take ancient themes with a modern twist, such as what looks like a Scandinavian runic inscription (Figure 3) that reads '[LE]AD•US•FROM•DEATH•TO•LIFE•FROM•FALSEHOOD•TO•TRUTH•LEAD' in a loop that seems to run into the ground and out again. Others make use of wholly modern symbology but with the motifs arranged as if adorning an ancient rock art panel (Figure 4). Yet others seem to reach back to the most ancient forms of rock art in the style of cup marks but in this case encoded with numbers and geometric shapes within the cups (Figure 5).



Figure 3. The 'runic stone' on the west side of the stone circle, looking southeast.



Figure 4. The 'symbol stone' in the stone row, looking southwest.

Connections between the motifs, their meanings, and the work that goes on within the adjacent and intervisible GCHQ is obvious. The very name of the work emphasises the link. But the symbolism runs deeper, and probably draws on the speculative but interesting 'Stone Tape' theory, an idea grounded in nineteenth century parapsychology (Anon 2019a) but popularised in the 1970s following the broadcast by the BBC of Nigel Kneale's Christmas ghost-story of the same name (Anon 2019b). The basic proposition is that inanimate materials such as wood and stone somehow absorb a record of nearby events, especially those that are emotionally charged. Under certain supernatural circumstances this record will 'replay' as apparitions of various kinds that can be perceived by those with appropriate sensitivities.

'wood and stone somehow absorb a record of nearby events'

Speculative for sure, but, nonetheless, an interesting way of thinking that might just be relevant to understanding the intentions of those behind the production and use of rock art in other cultures. Certainly, it is something to conjure with if you visit the Listening Stones, and if you speak loudly or use your mobile phone while pondering their meanings beware as it might not only be the nearby spooks that are recording your innermost thoughts, words, and emotional responses!

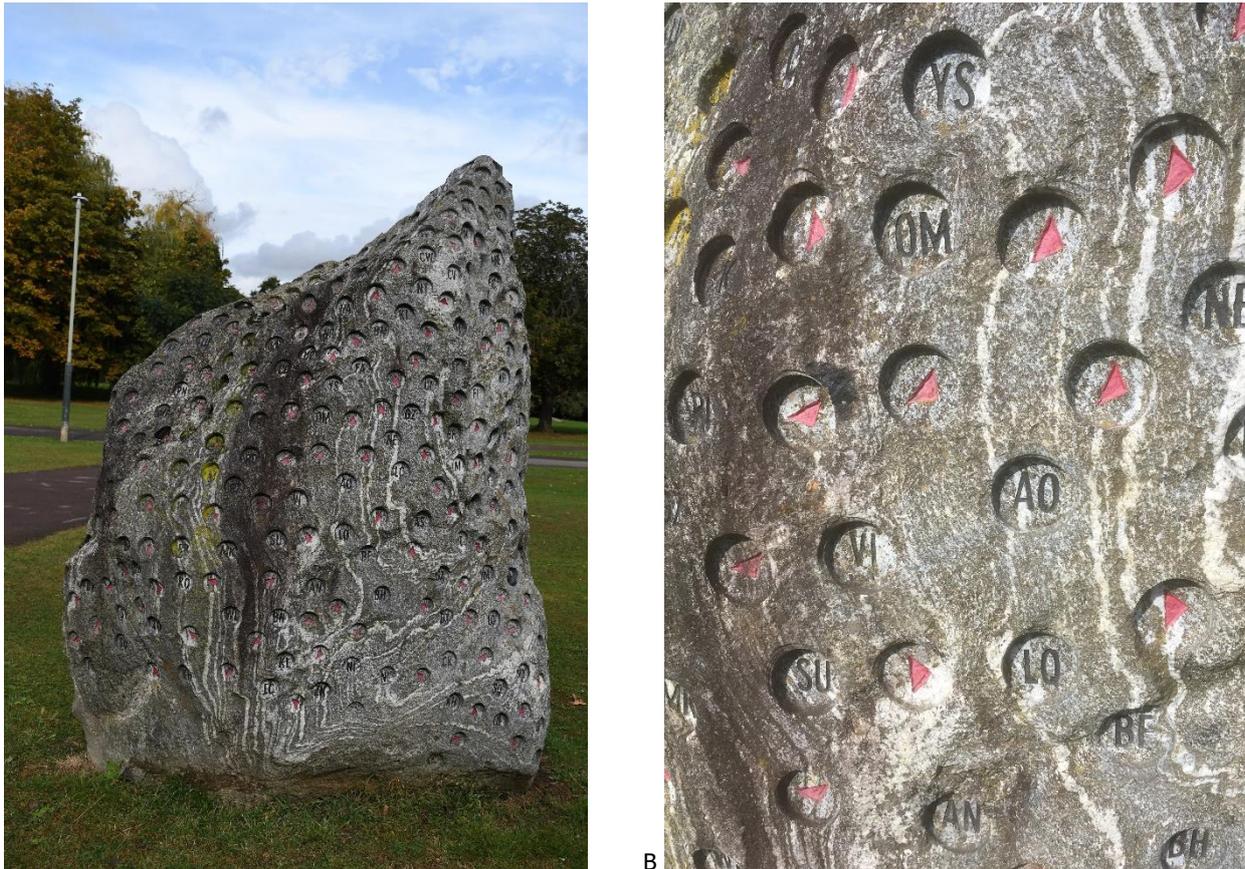


Figure 5. The 'cup marked' stone in the stone row. A general view looking northeast. B Detail of some of the 'cup marks'.

References:

- Anon. 2019a. Stone tape. Wikipedia. Available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Tape; accessed 21 Sept 2019.
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