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NOTE

Variations on a Theme: An Account of Some Possible Kerbed Boulders in the South Pennines and Cumbria

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This Note describes a number of features comprising sub-circular stone patterns, arguably deliberate settings, relating to much larger rocks, located in the upland of Calderdale, West Yorkshire and in central Cumbria and in Ireland. Parallels in south-west England are outlined, and suggestions made regarding interpretation. Connections are made with other forms of the appropriation of natural features, and with the way that archaeologists come to notice things.

Keywords: kerbed boulder; South Pennines; social construction; materiality

Landscape Context and Terminology

The South Pennines form a dissected plateau rising to over 400m, underlain by Namurian rocks of the Millstone Grit series in a gentle, anticlinal form; the area of Calderdale, with three features described below, did not bear moving ice during the Late Devensian. The geology of the Lake District is rather better known, comprising largely igneous and metamorphic rocks

glaciated in a radial fashion. A number of features have been identified here and one is described in detail.

The term “kerbed boulder” has, for some time, been applied to a small number of features in the south-west of England (English Heritage 2001). Typically the feature consists of a large natural rock, either erratic, earthfast or outcropping, that has been made distinctive by the addition of a penannular arc

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or bank of stones forming a kerb around and adjoining the stone. Over the last 10 years or so it has become increasingly clear that this type of feature is not confined to the south-west of England.

Features

1: Turvin Clough. (SD98775.20946)

Two re-entrants, Blake Clough and one with no name, define a spur on the north-west side of Turvin Clough which bears a number of apparent funerary cairns. Above these is a small outcrop of Lower Kinderscout Grit. On the downslope side of the outcrop is a ring of boulders of the same rock, placed such that the outcrop completes the circle (Figure 1). A presumed funerary cairn has been inserted between the curve of the circle and the outcrop itself (Figure 2).

2: Higher Moor – Stoodley Pike. (SD97432.23401)

A large block of Lower Kinderscout Grit is set vertically on the extreme edge of a level expanse of bedrock. The block is

just sufficiently supported, and rocks ponderously from end to end. The level expanse of bedrock shows differential erosion suggesting that the block may have been levered up into its present position. On the opposite side of the block is a semi-circular setting of stones deep in the turf (Figures 3 and 4).

3: North of Winny Stones – Leaning Grooves Flat. (SE01275.32024)

A substantial, earthfast whaleback of Guiseley Grit is surrounded by peat up to 40 cm deep. On the northern side is a semi-circular setting of stones, in this case with a small, turf-level cairn inside it (Figures 5 and 6).

5: Rydal Head – Rydal valley below Fairfield. (NY36254.10777)

The Rydal Head feature is within the corrie at the top end of the valley, on a small terrace above the stream. A large erratic of Lincombe Tams Tuff has a continuous curving arc of locally-derived boulders and cobbles on the northern, up-valley side.



Figure 1. Turvin Clough. Boulder ring adjoining outcrop (beneath the camera position). Photo: author.

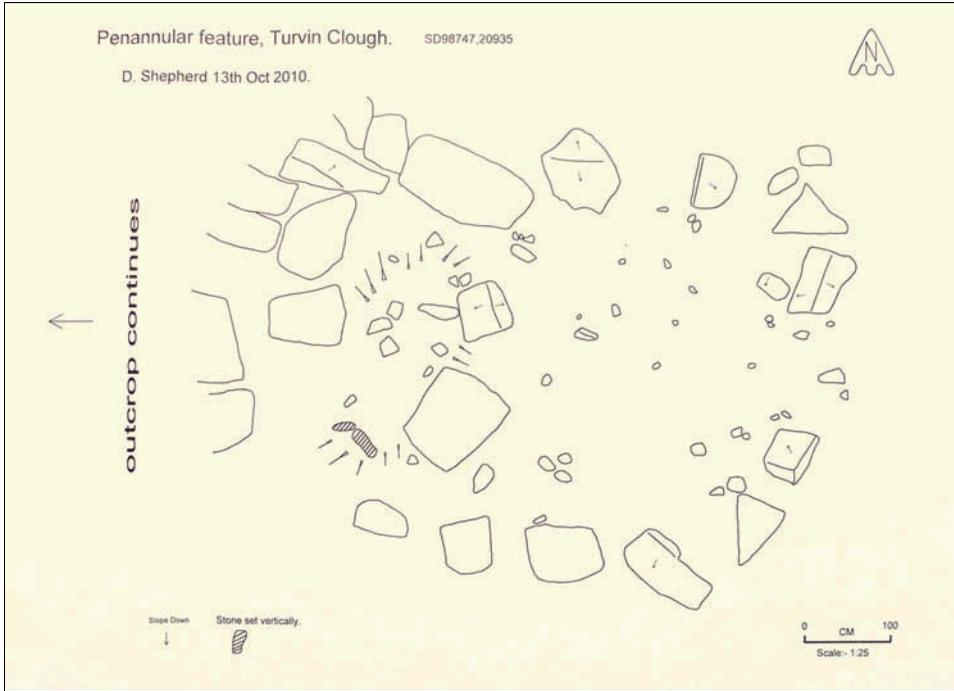


Figure 2. Turvin Clough plan.



Figure 3. Higher Moor. Rocking stone with boulder arc indicated by 25cm scales. Photo: author.

The erratic is some 3.5 m long and one end of the arc joins the end of the erratic whilst the other terminates 0.7 m short of the opposite end. The furthest outward extent of the arc provides an internal measurement of 1.8 m (Figure 7).

Further Cumbrian Examples

Peter Rodgers and Aaron Watson located a number of features, especially in and around Langdale (Rodgers personal communications, 2000, 2005, 2006), some of which bear a striking

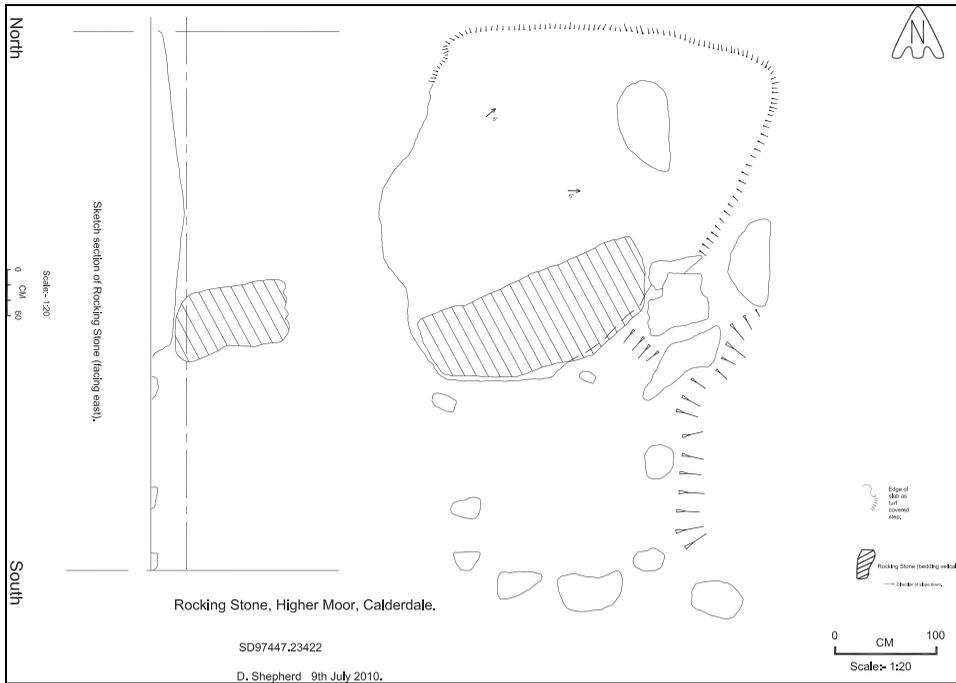


Figure 4. Higher Moor plan.



Figure 5. Winny Stones. Large earthfast with turf-level arc containing cairn. Photo: author.

resemblance to those outlined above (Figure 8). Rodgers drew parallels with features in Cornwall and suggested a possible link with established Bronze Age funerary practice, and archaeologists from the Lake District National Park

Authority concurred with this view. Several of the features were included in a survey made prior to footpath refurbishment in an area on the north side of Langdale, close to Stickle Tarn (Oxford Archaeology North 2005).

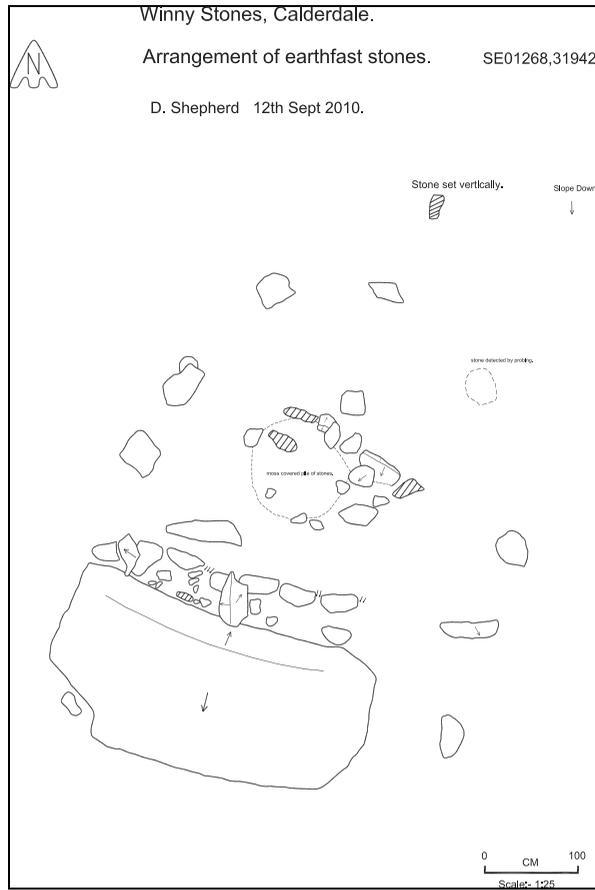


Figure 6. Winy Stones plan.



Figure 7. Rydal Head. Photo: author.



Figure 8. Stickle Tam. Large boulder on a knoll, with an obvious penannular surround. Photo: P Rodgers.



Figure 9. Castle Hows. On rising ground with a clear, turf-level arc. Photo: author.

The OA North interpretation leaves open the possibility of a prehistoric date but inclines toward an early historic origin, making a connection with nearby Norse enclosures and stock management structures (Quartermaine and Leech 2012). Similar features in other areas of the Lake District however do not have an immediate association with historic agricultural/pastoral features (Rodgers 2005). The Castle

Hows example lies just outside the Oxford North survey area (Figure 9).

Irish Examples

The Cavan Burren is a less well-known upland area (about 250 m OD) some 3 km to the south of Blacklion, in County Cavan, Ireland, and much of it is given over to commercial forestry. Essentially the area consists of glaciated

Carboniferous limestone with numerous sandstone erratics. Meticulous fieldwork and recording by Gaby Burns and Jim Nolan (2012) has so far produced an account of a complex relict landscape of extensive walling, prehistoric stone-working, dwelling sites, “modified monumental boulders” including propped stones, and rock art (Burns and Nolan 2012, 2, and personal communications). There is a complex suite of interventions and modifications, including examples of stones that

have been deliberately split and moved after the manner of some stones in Brittany (Kytmanow 2008; Kytmanow et al. 2008), and erratics where the bed-rock pedestals have been reduced to create spaces and the impression of elevation. Presently it is the boulders with “kerbstone walls” that have greatest relevance. Several features serve to demonstrate the similarity between the English and Irish examples. For clarity the Burns and Nolan numbering has been retained (Figures 10–12).



Figure 10. Feature 701. The turf-level arc of stones is highlighted. Photo: G Burns.



Figure 11. Feature H14. Boulder bears rock art; the penannular surround is moss-covered. Photo: G Burns.



Figure 12. Feature 718. Erratic possibly moved from its pedestal. Surround of large stones. Photo: G. Burns.

Possible Dates

Turner (1990) provides an, arguably overly-categorical, account of the wide variety of circular features noted on Dartmoor, which includes four examples of a “segment from tor or natural rock” (1990, 37). He notes features at Chinkwell Tor, Com Ridge Rock, and two at High Willhays. Three appear to be stony banks describing arcs depending on central outcrop features, whilst one is termed a “segment stone setting” (Turner 1990, 69) and takes a similar curving line. Each defines an area adjoining an easily-seen landscape feature – a prominent rock (Figure 13). The English Heritage database records two kerbed boulders, at White Tor in Devon and near Goldgiggings Quarry in Cornwall. The entry for the latter notes

Kerbed boulders are one of a diverse range of ceremonial monuments dating to the Bronze Age (c.2000 – 700BC) ... Kerbed boulders are a recently-recognised monument type which combine elements known from other classes of contemporary ceremonial monument. These include the reverence of a natural outcrop evident in tor cairns and the construction of small

orthostatic settings around funerary monuments, a common feature of cairns in south-west England. Only two examples are known nationally, both from south-eastern Bodmin Moor, associated with a large dispersed grouping of Bronze Age ceremonial and funerary monuments. As a very rare monument type which provides an important insight into the nature of Prehistoric ritual activity and beliefs, all surviving examples are considered worthy of preservation. (English Heritage 1992, Entry 1010362)

The database records a further example at Horse Point, near St Agnes on Scilly, and the commentary is expanded to include the possibility of a Neolithic date.

There are obvious difficulties in inferring any date from these accounts: some of the Cumbrian examples may just have a possible association with early historical agricultural activity, though there are Bronze Age features at Rydal Head; in the south-east of England there is the proximity of Bronze Age reaves, also on Bodmin there are older features and finds; whilst the Stickle Tam area also has sites of Neolithic axe production. The Cavan Burren and Rydal lie in confined and

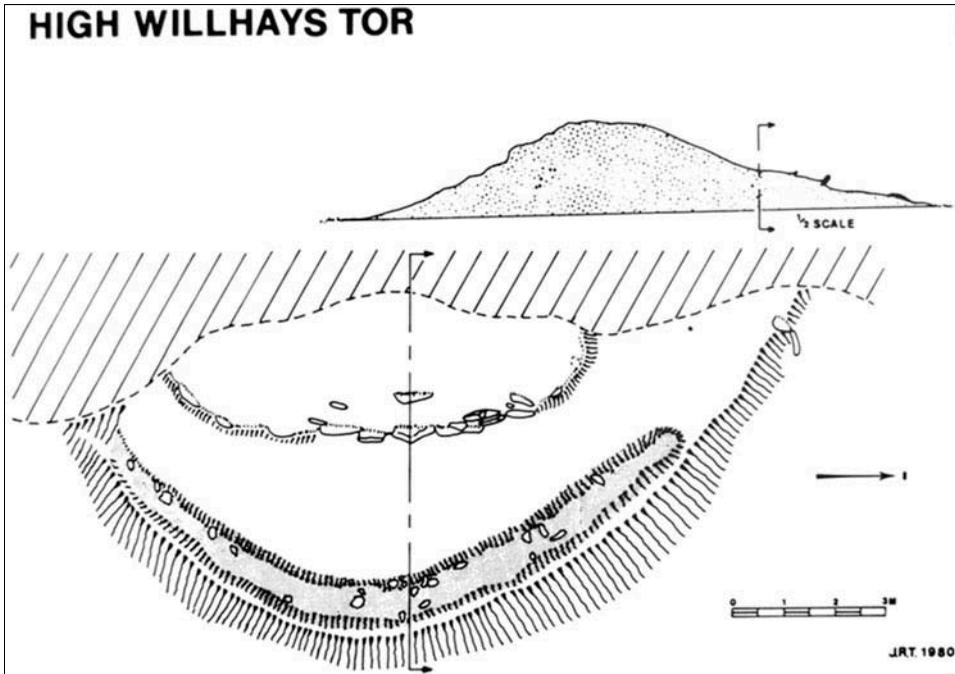


Figure 13. High Willhays Tor. Plan shows the attached arc (Turner 1990, 37).

complex Bronze and Iron Age landscapes, and the South Pennine examples are close to both Mesolithic flint/chert scatters and also later (early Bronze Age?) cup-marks.

Commentary

As will be clear from the descriptions, none of these features is a soaring, megalithic structure; there is an intimacy of scale deriving from the practical considerations of physically moving the stones. The largest blocks at Turvin Clough may be 200 kilos and have been moved at most some 15 m from the parent outcrop. At Higher Moor the large poised block approaches one ton and has, probably, simply been pried upright. There, and at Winny Stones and Rydal, the stones defining the curved enclosures are smaller, 10 to 15 kilos at most. None of the features would have

required more than (say) four or five people to be involved in their construction, possibly over a very short period of time. One obvious conclusion is that these are local monuments for local people.

The South Pennine examples and those from the Cavan Burren are composed of stones placed singly, with deliberate gaps between. This is also the case with the Castle Hows example above Langdale. The feature at Rydal Head, in common with H14 in the Cavan Burren and the Cornish examples, has a more continuous stony bank. Whilst there are differences in the central/natural elements, the addition of a penannular placement can be seen to express a common conception of the appropriate ascription of significance, of the correct way to establish or memorialize the importance of a place. A reasonable

inference from this is that people might be expected to encounter and recognize more than one – an expression of belief extending beyond the immediately local to neighbors, to a shared conception of necessary distinction. Clearly there is an immediate, performative element concerned with the process of construction, but subsequent activity related to the commemorative aspect is much less accessible to modern observation. Essentially this is where interpretation ends and excavation begins; the social construction of these features is evident, their purpose is not (Cooney and Chapman. 2010. *inter alia*).

Whilst the features described above have sufficient similarities to be considered together, the author's fieldwork regarding such small-scale interventions in the natural landscape is still continuing so there can be no reliable inferences about overall distribution at present. Similarly, there is little to be gained from examining the contrasting viewsheds of such a small sample of features, beyond the observations that there are expansive views in varying directions except to the north, and the orientation of components of the features do not seem to respect any particular solar or lunar horizon events; there may perhaps be more local references or relationships. The possible funerary cairns included in two are not necessarily contemporary, and may mark a continued recognition of the significance of the places over time¹.

Our – modern archaeologists' – sense-making of the prehistoric features and structures we encounter is inevitably predicated on our modern conceptions and categorizations of the world. We divide secular and sacred, natural and anthropogenic and so on, such that we construct a commonality of discourse. As

Bradley (2000, 103) pointed out, this is not necessarily the way that prehistoric people made sense of their world; there are other ways of regarding the physical context and the import or symbolic content of actions within it. Topping (1997, 3) stresses that 'what is being experienced is in the present and is based upon a perceptual framework that is entirely the product of our own socialization and background'.

More plainly, what does a monument need to do to get recognized? Preferably it should resemble one of the acknowledged types of monument already having currency, but penannular additions to large boulders, though remarked upon, do not yet form a part of the prehistoric canon. The difficulty lies with the conceptual palette of the observers. There are large boulders that have anthropogenic additions, only the age and purpose of the kerbs are as yet unclear.

Mizin (2012a, 2012b) outlined essentially natural features in north-west Russia that have legends or folkloric traditions attached to them. The mythologizing of natural elements within the prehistoric landscape is a helpful construct, and Mizin has also worked extensively on seids – anthropogenically-propped stones in Karelia, northern Russia, and the corresponding parts of Finland and Sweden (Mizin personal communication, September 2013). The present author discussed very similar features in the UK and Ireland (Shepherd 2013), instances where again active, structural interventions have discernibly modified natural features possessed of a prior biography.

In discussing the materiality of stones constituting megalithic structures Scarre (2004, 141) points out that people confer significance on "natural" objects through their encounters and

interpretations, and that, “‘created’ objects are inevitably made from ‘natural’ materials and it is often unclear what is natural and what is not”. The process of materialization, or social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966), the active accomplishment of the attribution of meaning,

need make no distinction between materials that owe their form and appearance to human intervention, and those that do not. It may include living things ... or objects that might today be considered inanimate, such as mountains or boulders. (Scarre 2004, 141)

Similarly Bradley (2000, 11) observes:

for the people who used them (particular natural features) would have been only the outward embodiment of a wider system of belief that had profound consequences for the way in which the landscape was perceived. These sacred sites also played a part in people’s understanding of how the world was formed and of their place within it.

There is an understandable attraction in the security offered by empirical proof such that any feature is natural until proved anthropogenic. However, there is a phase of objective hypothesizing or prospection that forms an essential component of archaeological endeavor, and the present paper should be read in this light. These geographically and geologically diverse features cannot be readily accounted for by any natural or historic purpose and it follows that there is a compelling likelihood of a prehistoric origin somewhat beyond a frame of reference predicated on antiquarian typologies; a more productive investigative strategy might need to include an awareness of situated, possibly contrasting, materialities – our (modern) and their (pre-historic) social constructions of reality.

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Note

1. These features are not unknown to professional archaeologists and dating is the key to further interpretation. Following a site visit Louise Brown, Community Archaeologist with Pennine Prospects, a LEADER-funded heritage body, will advise on an excavation strategy for one of the South Pennine sites. This is projected for autumn 2015.

Notes on contributor

The author has been involved in archaeology for over fourteen years and his fieldwork has led to the location and recording of numerous prehistoric features in the South Pennines. With an academic background in social psychology his preoccupation is with the ways that people come to express their relationships with places.

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