

Art in this World and Art for the Underworld: an Appraisal of the Later Prehistoric Menhir of Robin Hood's Stone, Allerton, Liverpool

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Abstract

Surviving within the southern suburbs of Liverpool are two prehistoric monuments: The Calderstones and Robin Hood's Stone. The six highly decorated carved stones that form the Calderstones monument are believed to be the remains of a Neolithic passage grave dating to around 3000 BC. Approximately 1 kilometre to the south south west of the Calderstones is Robin Hood's Stone, a single monolith (or standing stone). This monument, moved and repositioned around 1928, has a series of natural vertical grooves that extend to the current ground surface below which there is an array of cupmarks and a single carved cup-and-ring. Assuming that during prehistory these carvings would have been buried and hidden from view, I ask the question, what was the purpose of carving and then burying rock-art? Based on anthropological and ethnographic evidence it is clear that rock-art has special meaning. In the case of the motifs carved at Robin Hood's Stone was there a link between the rock-art and the supernatural entities that lived and roamed a subterranean world?

Keywords: *cup-and-rings, grooves, monolith, natural, rock-art, underworld*

Introduction

Megalithic art in southern Britain is usually associated with burial monuments, found on capstones, sometimes on uprights (orthostats) and on exposed natural rock-outcrops sometimes lying close to a burial-ritual monument (Mazel *et al.* 2007; Nash 2007a; 2007b). In Wales and in north west England there are around 55 rock-art sites that date to the Neolithic/Bronze Age with the artistic repertoire restricted to geometric and curvilinear abstract motifs (Beckensall 1999; Daniel 1950; Forde-Johnston 1956, 1957; Nash *et al.* 2005; Nash 2007b; Sharkey 2004; Shee-Twohig 1981). The repertoire of carved motifs is usually restricted to cupmarks, cup-and-rings and interconnecting grooves. There are, however, a limited number of sites that possess an extensive vocabulary of motifs including the two passage graves of Barcloddiad y Gawres and Bryn Celli Ddu in Anglesey; concentric circle carvings on monoliths at Llanbedr, near Harlech and Llwydiarth Esgob in Anglesey; a selection of Bronze Age weaponry on Stone 53 at Stonehenge,

Wiltshire and footprints on the roofing slab of a Bronze Age burial cist at Pool Farm in Somerset (Coles *et al.* 2000; Grinsell 1957; Goskar *et al.* 2003; Lynch 1967, 1969; Nash and Stanford *forthcoming*; Sharkey 2004). Much of this art was exclusive and strategically placed, maybe deliberately hidden from view. This is arguably an intentional act whereby carved motifs are turned inwards towards, for example, the fabric of the mound rather than facing outwards and being visible. Examples include the kerb stones that enclose the mounds at Newgrange and Dowth in the Boyne Valley, County Meath of central Ireland or the roofing stones at Gavri'nis in the Gulf of Morbihan in Brittany (Giot 1960; Le Roux 1985; Shee-Twohig 1981; O'Sullivan 1986, 1993). This act of carving motifs and then burying them suggests that it was thought not only the living view the art but also those entities that occupy the underworld. A similar process that includes artistic endeavour followed by deliberate concealment may also be present on the Robin Hood's Stone where simple curvilinear motifs are present on the base of the stone. According to the plaque inscription, the stone faced south. One can only assume that it was facing south during prehistoric use as well.

A recent history and an ancient past

Synonymous with prehistoric Liverpool is the now destroyed Calderstones monument, the remains of which are housed within a pagoda in Calderstones Park. This monument, comprising six highly decorative stones is one of three sites in England and Wales that form the eastern extent of the Late Neolithic passage grave tradition (Cowell and Warhurst 1984; Cowell 2008). This monument possesses a unique set of carved megalithic motifs including concentric circles, cupmarks, cup-and-rings, grooved lines and spirals (see Forde-Johnston 1956, 1957). In addition to these motifs the Calderstones also have carved footprints and a dagger, a medieval Maltese cross and a carving of a church (see Nash and Stanford, this volume).

Both the Calderstones and the Robin Hood's Stone have in recent history been moved from their original locations; the Calderstones monument probably stood close to what is now a traffic island occupying the junction of Menlove Avenue [A 562], Calderstones Road and Druids Cross Road and Robin Hood's Stone was moved from the middle of a field to the side of a nearby busy thoroughfare.

Surprisingly, the antiquarian record for this area of north west Britain is good with the main focus of attention being given to the nearby Calderstones monument (Ecroyd Smith 1868; Hand 1915; Romilly Allen 1888; Simpson 1866 and Stewart-Brown 1911). Later references to Robin Hood's Stone are limited and usually accompany discussions associated with the Calderstones (Cowell and Warhurst 1984; Cowell 2008



Figure 1. The present location of the Robin Hood's Stone, enclosed within iron railings.

and Nash and Stanford [this volume]). Its obscurity may also be attributed to the fact that little has been mentioned about the rock-art present around the base of the stone.

The Robin Hood's Stone has been designated a Scheduled Monument (National Monument No. 33891) and as such is afforded statutory protection. The stone was moved to its present location on the corner of Archerfield Road and Booker Avenue (West Allerton) (NGR SJ 3997 8638) in 1928 in order to make way for housing. Various antiquarian sources suggest that the stone was moved to its pre-1928 location from the Calderstones, between 1814 and 1845, by a Mr Booker who used the stone as a cattle rubbing stone (Stewart-Brown 1911, 212). Historian Mike Royden has suggested that the stone may have been included in the boundary dispute of 1568 where there is mention of a stone being removed from a mound in 1550.¹ At the time of the post-1928 reinstatement, the base of the stone was unfortunately embedded in concrete and encased by a set of iron railings (figure 1). Not surprisingly since reinstatement, minor damage has occurred to the upper section of the stone as well as at the current ground level. As part of the ritual of moving the stone an inscribed bronze plaque was fixed to a stone (at ground level) stating:

This monolith known as Robin Hood's Stone stood in a field named The Stone Hey at a spot 198 feet distant and in a direction bearing 7 degrees east of true north from its present position to which it was moved in August 1928. The arrow indicates the direction of the original site. This side of the stone formerly faced south (figure 2).

Currently, the stone stands around 2.4m (probably with a further section of unknown depth buried), a width of 0.92m and a thickness of 0.44m. The upper section of the stone (that is the element that now stands above the ground surface) shows most of the cupmarks, the cup-and-ring, pitting and a series of deeply weathered grooves that extend around to all the faces of the stone.

¹ <http://www.btinternet.com/~m.royden/mrlhp/local/calders/calders.htm>

It has been suggested that these grooves are the result of polishing axes (see Cowell 2008, 11). Another interpretation was that the grooves were of medieval origin, created by sharpening arrows.² Mr R. Griffith's *History of Toxteth Park* (1907) suggested that most of the shooting of the arrows took place in the southern part of the field. A more eccentric idea, originating from 19th-century antiquarians, was that the grooves were made by Druids in order to drain blood from sacrificial victims (Cowell 2008, 11).³ However, the more probable explanation is that they are naturally formed along the vertical bedding/lamination channels of the stone, the majority of which are located on the southern face of the monument.⁴ A similar arrangement of vertical grooves is also present on the upper section of Stone C at the Calderstones; both stones are geologically identical.

The Robin Hood's Stone originally stood in a field locally known as Stone Hey⁵ some 60m to the north north east of its present location⁶ and was excavated on the 29th October 1910 (figure 3). According to Stewart-Brown, who was present during this excavation, the site had been previously investigated (Stewart-Brown 1911, 212). Based on a brief account and several photographic images Stewart-Brown recalls that on the surface of the stone, below the ground level, were a series of later prehistoric carved curvilinear motifs including eight cupmarks and one cup-and-ring (figure 4).⁷ Above and surrounding this tightly-carved set of motifs was an area of uniform pitting which extended as far as the exposed section of the stone. It is unclear from the photographic image whether or not this was the result of natural weathering or made by human agency. Moreover, it is unclear if they are continued on the side and northern faces. Interestingly, the naturally weathered grooves terminate at the point where the pitting starts. There are also several horizontal grooves (or scratches) located above the cup-and-ring which may or may not be carved rock-art. On the eastern side of the southern face there is a missing section of the surface which also may have contained rock-art. It is also unclear (and unrecorded) what, if any, rock-art may be present on the sides, base and northern face of the stone.

The type of stone used for both the Robin Hood's Stone and the Calderstones is identical and was probably

² Stewart-Brown, whilst present at the excavation of the stone in October 1910, noted the absence of arrowheads.

³ Alfred Watkins in 1933 at a Woodcraft meeting in south Herefordshire suggested that the vertical grooves on the Queen's Stone in Herefordshire were used to hold in place a wicker cage in order to imprison sacrificial victims (Shoemith 1990).

⁴ Similar vertical grooves are recorded on a number of standing stones including the Queens Stone in Herefordshire and the Devil's Arrows in Yorkshire.

⁵ The 'hey' element meaning field.

⁶ The [English Heritage] Scheduling notice mistakenly places the Calderstones monument within the vicinity of the original location of Robin Hood's Stone.

⁷ Cupmarks and cup-and-rings are also present on Stones B, C, D and E of the Calderstones (see Cowell 2008; Nash and Stanford [this volume]).



Figure 2. The southern face of Robin Hood's Stone prior to its relocation in 1928 (Photo: Stuart-Brown 1911).

quarried locally. The stone from both sites comprises a soft, fine to coarse grained reddish sandstone with occasional quartz pebble conglomerates (known as the Sherwood Sandstone Group).⁸ The geological quality of the rock produces a coarse pecking and is very different to the carved stones at Bryn Celli Ddu and Barclodiad y Gawres in Anglesey where the sandstone is much harder and finer grained.

Looking beyond the urban landscape

The prehistoric setting of the Robin Hood's Stone and the nearby Calderstones monument has been completely lost due to early historic landscape division followed by late post-medieval urban development, especially over the past 100 years. Based on late 19th-century mapping, the Robin Hood's Stone stood within an enclosed field system. At this time, the Calderstones monument was unfortunately located at a junction of five roads; (the consequences to its survival inevitable!) Despite this however, one can make some inferences concerning the landscape position. Not surprisingly, the original position of both monuments is similar to other Neolithic burial-ritual groups such as Bryn Celli Ddu and the Boyne Valley Group in Ireland, where there is clear interaction between burial-ritual monuments and satellite monuments such as standing stones (see Cooney 2000; Nash 2006).

⁸ Stone F at the Calderstones can be described as a finer-grained sandstone.

Within the part of Liverpool where Robin Hood's Stone once stood, the topography is generally undulating with land sloping gently south westwards towards the River Mersey (Figure 5). The Robin Hood's Stone and the Calderstones are sited west within the hinterland of a small range of hills that includes Beechcroft and Woolton Hill. This range rises to a maximum of *circa* 75m above ordnance datum. Similar to all other passage graves, the Calderstones once occupied the intermediate slopes. Much of the hillsides would have been covered by broad-leaf woodland whilst it is possible that the lowland areas would have been settled and cultivated. Cultivation would have intensified towards the end of the Neolithic and the start of the Bronze Age. However, the evidence for settlement and associated findspots within the vicinity of both monuments is limited. Based on the Historic Environment Record (HER) only one axe findspot has been identified, 2.3km west of Robin Hood's Stone, within the parish of Wavertree. A settlement is present at Hale, some 4km to the east; both settlement and findspot are close to the foreshore of the River Mersey. Marked on a map of 1568 are two monuments that have long since disappeared: one, a possible passage grave or Bronze Age burial mound known as Pikeloo Hill (described as a circular mound) and, two, a standing stone known as the Rodger Stone. Each stood *circa* 350m and *circa* 120m respectively south-west of the Calderstones (see Appendix 1 and Roberts, this volume). It is probable that all three monuments and possibly also the Robin Hood's Stone were inter-visible with each other.

Numerous findspots and settlements are present on Wirral and to the north of the city catchment. Based on the distribution of settlement, burial ritual monuments, ritual monuments and findspots, there appears to be a clear delineation of landscape use with settlement along the foreshore and burial-ritual monuments on the intermediate slopes. It is probable (and based on Neolithic burial-ritual monument core areas in Ireland and Wales) that the Robin Hood's Stone and the Calderstones (along with other monuments that have not survived in the archaeological record) formed part of a large ritualised landscape, what Cooney terms with regard to economic landscapes but is also apt here as a 'landscape collage' (2000, 45). This assumption is based on the notion that both monuments (and the now destroyed Pikeloo Hill and Rodger Stone monuments) were in use at the same time, and indeed interacting with each other. Within this landscape it would not only be monuments that interact with communities but also topography, the landscape cover and the rock-art.

Body of probability

There are many standing stones/menhirs within Atlantic Europe and within the Irish Sea Province that possess rock-art, usually in the form of single and multiple cupmarks (Nash *et al* 2005; Sharkey 2004). As far

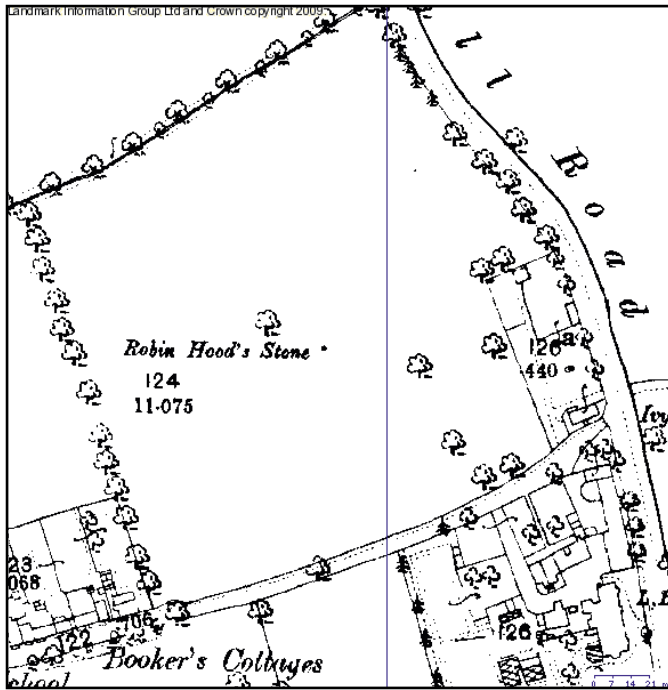


Figure 3. Ordnance Survey map section of 1893 showing the original location of the Robin Hood's Stone and its present location.

as the author is aware there are no other monuments within this group that have buried rock-art. The Robin Hood's Stone therefore presents an interesting dilemma. Was it merely a standing stone or was it incorporated into a much larger monument such as a passage grave?

The presence of rock-art (cupmarks and a cup-and-ring) possibly indicates an association with the Calderstones monument; both have cupmarks and cup-and-ring carvings. Based on this observation alone, one can suggest that the Robin Hood's Stone was in use at the same time as the Calderstones monument. It is clear that the Calderstones monument was erected and in use during the Late Neolithic and is roughly contemporary with other Irish Sea passage grave monuments (dating to between, say, *circa* 3200 to 2700 cal. BC). Based on the (good) archaeological records for Newgrange and Knowth in Ireland and Barclodiad y Gawres and Bryn Celli Ddu in Anglesey, activity in and around passage graves extends into the Early Bronze Age and beyond (Hemp 1930; Powell and Daniel 1956; O'Kelly 1982; Eogan 1986; Burrow *forthcoming*). This period of use probably represents at least a millennia of use. At the same time, the Robin Hood's Stone, along with many thousands of standing stones erected on either side of the Irish Sea are also in use and usually allied to stone circles, stone rows and cairns/barrows. However, they clearly correspond with several burial-ritual monument types: the passage grave tradition of the Late Neolithic and the barrows/cairns of the Early Bronze Age. Waddington *et al.* (2005) has, based on good systematic excavation at the burial-ritual site of Hunterheugh Crag in Northumberland, argued that cupmarks and

cup-and-ring engravings are possibly Early Neolithic in date. This early date, also postulated by Burgess (1989-90) extends the lifespan of standing stones to perhaps 1500 years of use. One could, therefore, suggest that the Robin Hood's Stone was standing prior to the Calderstones and continued to be used, either as part of a monument or part of a monument group.

Burial-ritual and processional landscapes through a 21st-century mindset

Within the anthropological and ethnographic records are numerous accounts of artistic endeavour being applied to the architecture of burial monuments, usually in the form of metaphoric iconography. Indeed, within contemporary Western society we honour the dead using intrinsic icons such as the weeping angel or the upturned torch (the extinguished flame) that indirectly symbolise death; these appear on gravestones and memorials and are present in most of our churchyards. Here, the symbols of death are clearly on display; usually their meaning extending beyond the symbolism of death and burial and into the realm of wealth and display (Litten 1991). However, there are many devices that are hidden and their meaning restricted, usually to immediate family and those who conduct and control interment. They include formal dress codes for the dead, jewellery, coffin furniture and the metaphysical statements of accomplishment, deed, thought and history of the deceased; things that do not survive in the archaeological record.

Following death, the physicality of the body remains firmly in the ground whilst the soul or spirit of the deceased embarks on a journey. Many world religions consider the spirit of the deceased to rise and enter a utopian state of everlasting peace and tranquillity, whilst many other religions purport the spirit embarking on a journey through the underworld. During the Neolithic period, grave goods would have been offered to the deceased in order to assist them onwards from what I suggest as the temporary housing of the body and soul, the stone chamber of the burial monument, to the next and probably final stage of their journey. Items for this journey would have included polished stone axes, flint tools (in particular arrowheads for hunting), pottery vessels containing food and drink (based on the rare survival of organic residues) and, in the case of the passage grave tradition, guidance to this underworld via strategically placed rock-art.

In many non-western societies the ancestral spirits can be summoned back from time to time, maybe to assist with later interment. In a similar way prehistoric rock-art, which was hidden, static and probably possessing socially-restricted meaning, would have guided members of the community through a series of landscape places and monument spaces. The ancestors may have been drawn through the rock-art itself. Very little of this rock-art is in full view; the majority is hidden within the



Figure 4. Rock-art including cupmarks and cup-in-rings occupying the lower section of the Robin Hood's Stone, discovered following an excavation of the site (Photo: Stewart-Brown 1911).

inner sections of the passage and in the chamber areas. Some rock-art such as the carved kerbing at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth in the Boyne Valley, Ireland is in full view and can be considered public art, the repertoire of symbols probably representing a pictorial narrative (Eogan 1986; Hemp 1930; O'Kelly 1982). At Gavri'nis in Brittany and within the the Boyne Valley tombs and, in some respects, at Barclodiad y Gawres and Bryn Celli Ddu in Anglesey, certain panels are hidden and inturned towards the mound. Some of this art is extremely elaborate in form and it is probable that some of this inturned rock-art originates from earlier monument types.

At the Table des Marchands passage grave, within the Gulf of Morbihan, NW France, one third of an enormous menhir has been incorporated as a capstone into the chamber architecture. Carved onto the stone is an axe which remains visible. The other two sections of the stone have been also used to form capstones and are incorporated into the roofs of Gavri'nis and nearby Er Grah (Burl 1985; Daniel 1960; Le Roux 1985). However, the sections containing once continuous figurative art, including two goats and a large axe, have their art hidden and facing upwards into the upper sections of the two mounds. The destruction of the menhir and its incorporation into a later monument appears to be a deliberate act.

Moreover, the positioning of certainly two of the three sections conforms to how megalithic art is being used in passage graves. It is probable that the Robin Hood's Stone has two histories: one forming part of a burial-ritual monument, the other as a later landscape outlier/marker.

Burial-ritual monuments, along with satellite stone and wooden monuments such as standing stones, stone rows, and stone and timber circles appear to conform to a generic set of rules and the Robin Hood's Stone and Calderstones monument are no exception to this. Nearly all burial-ritual monuments from Atlantic Europe are located on intermediate slopes; very few are sited on the valley floor or on the highest point within the landscape (Tilley 1991, 1994). There are of course one or two examples that do not conform to these rules (for example, West Kennet Long Barrow, Wiltshire). Robin Hood's Stone and the monuments that once occupied the western slopes of what is now Allerton would have been within uncultivated land, probably broad-leaf woodland. Communities using these monuments would have been expected to approach each monument in a particular way, complying to a set of strict protocols (as we do today when approaching religious buildings).

It is probable (but unproven) that the Robin Hood's Stone was a megalithic outlier that was ritualistically associated with the Calderstones (or Pikeloo Hill monument) and in order to approach these monuments, participants would be expected to congregate or merely process past the Robin Hood's Stone. The site may have acted as a geographic as well as a ritual maker within the landscape and in order to view the realm of the dead, one would have to approach the ritual landscape via this monument. It is unlikely that, during later prehistory, visitors to this stone would have seen the rock-art. However, as suggested earlier there is no reason to dismiss the idea that the stone once stood the other way round and therefore the rock-art would have been exposed. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for this.

Final comments

Many of the ideas expressed within this section of the paper are derived from a 21st-century mindset and it is possible that no relationship may have existed between any of the prehistoric monuments within the locality, especially if one is to consider the issues of the potential time (life) span of the monuments involved, the date-range of each monument type and their origin.

Despite these reservations, it is clear that trading links existed between Neolithic and Bronze Age communities on either side of the Irish Sea Province (Cooney 2000; Herity 1970; Lynch 1969; Nash 2007a; O'Sullivan 1993). Included within an exchange network that included exotic and utilitarian commodities was the

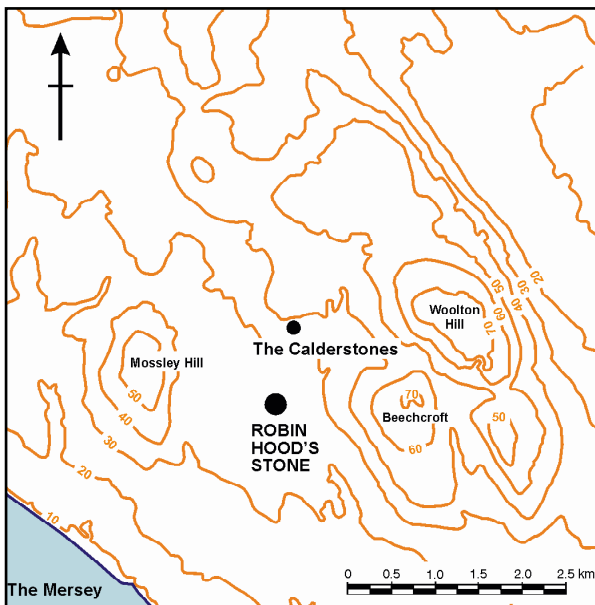


Figure 5. Map showing the location of the Robin Hood's Stone, the Calderstones Monument and their surrounding topography.

concept of burying the dead in a particular way, using a variety of props including architectural style, in this case, the generic architecture of the passage grave, and the use of rock-art and landscape markers such as standing stones (Nash 2006). I have previously suggested that later prehistoric rock-art, especially sites in Western Britain, has a direct association with burial-ritual sites, either on, within or around the monument (Nash *et al.* 2005).

As stated earlier, the Robin Hood's Stone and the Calderstones both occupy intermediate slopes, between 30 and 50m above ordnance datum. These two ornately decorated monuments served a purpose within a wider ritualised landscape; one – the Calderstones – as a resting place for the dead, and in my view, the other as a processional marker, whereby the community would have approached the ritual landscape in a particular way using the Robin Hood's Stone as a point of reference within an uncultivated landscape. From this point, the community could then progress on to the next stage of the journey, maybe on to the Calderstones monument itself. The Robin Hood's Stone may have possessed a number of histories before being used as a later Neolithic marker. The rock-art, possibly partly concealed beneath the current ground surface is a testament to a ritualised and symbolic belief system that considered that art was not just a device to inform the living but a way of communicating with the dead and the spirits of the underworld. Much of what survives from the Neolithic period in Allerton, Liverpool and elsewhere in Neolithic Europe has parallels in the way we approach our religious centres. It is clear that there are strategically-placed architectural devices that compel us to approach certain landscapes in a particular way using a variety of protocols; likewise the Robin Hood's Stone is one

such later prehistoric device that establishes order for both the living and those who journey the underworld.

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