

Lecture: NEOLITHIC ROCK ART by Jane Russell on 13th November 2018

Neolithic rock art - Sacred or secular works of art or graffiti?

Perhaps in Neolithic times this was not regarded as art at all. There are 7000 sites of rock art panels in the British Isles:

- 3500 in England
- 2700 in Scotland
- 75 in Wales
- 900 in Ireland

Many of these sites have been discovered by Local History/Archaeology Societies.

The earliest examples are to be found in Portugal and north western Spain. Rock art in the British Isles is to be found on vertical rocks, either on standing stones or in passage tombs, or carved into horizontal rocks in the landscape. The tools used would have been quartz or any other hard stone available, and designs were incised, carved or pecked into the rock.

Monuments, particularly the passage tombs in Ireland, built between 3500 and 3200 BC, seem to have strong links with astronomy and possibly mark important times in the calendar, i.e. midwinter, midsummer and the solstices. The most decorative artwork in Europe is to be found at the **Boinne** passage tombs.

The large tomb at **Newgrange** contains carved spirals and curling lines which can be interpreted as the passage of the sun and moon through the heavens. **Knowth** passage tomb is cruciform in shape and has no burials so perhaps it was used only for holding ceremonies. It contains 250 decorated stones displaying vertical carvings of lines which may indicate the rising and setting sun. At **Loughcrew** there is a sun motif roof stone which, it is thought, could have been used to work out the Spring and Autumn equinoxes.

Calendrical engravings also depict crescents and circles described by Martin Brennan in his book "The Stones of Time." The lunar year is 354 days long but the solar year is 365 (11 days' difference) so it would take 33 years to "catch up". The theory is that in prehistoric times there were 16 months in a year, each 22 days long. At **Knowth**, a stone guards the entrance with a carving that could depict either a human face or that of a deity. Either way it is very reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting of "The Scream"! At the entrance a light box defines the midwinter sunrise. The pattern of spirals and wavy lines also occurs in two passage tombs on **Anglesey**.

Scroll patterns and astronomical alignments are similar across all passage tombs in Ireland, Wales and in the Orkneys. At **Skara Brae** Neolithic village in the Orkneys the houses contain some carvings made up of diamond and triangle patterns. **The Ness of Brodgar** site, also in the Orkneys, has the largest amount of Neolithic building found in Europe with a long period of ceremonial use, from 3500 to 2200 BC. The first stone was discovered in 1925. Over 800 engravings have been found and there are traces of red,

white and black paint on the walls. There is Neolithic rock art at **Maes Howe** tomb in Orkney, as well as some later graffiti of Norse runes.

In England and Scotland the carvings are predominantly cup marks with rings and “gullies”. The meaning of these is not known and open to interpretation. Possible explanations are that they are meeting places or signposts to ceremonial sites. Mostly they are found on rocky outcrops and standing stones. The best examples are at **Roughting Linn** in Northumbria; **Lordenshaw** in the Cheviot Hills; and in the **Kilmartin Valley**, Scotland.

There is some Neolithic rock art in Sussex, which differs from the above as carvings were made on chalk blocks of zoomorphic subjects, as well as antler motifs which may represent the tools used. These are similar to examples found in Belgium so there may have been cross Channel links with mainland Europe.

To summarise there are four categories of Neolithic rock art in the British Isles:

- Those on monuments, as in Ireland, with strong links to astronomy, marking important times in the year (midwinter, midsummer and the solstices.)
- Those on Orkney, where rock art was found in settlements, ceremonial buildings and passage tombs.
- Those on rocky outcrops in the landscape that were possible route markers as in Scotland and Northern England.
- Those with an industrial connection as in Sussex.

So, lots of places to visit on your holidays!

Chris Evans