

What is Rock Art?

On Tuesday 13 March about 35 members of Appleby Archaeology Group enjoyed a thought-provoking and interesting talk by Dr Ken Fairless, team leader during the Northumberland and Durham Rock Art Project (NADRAP) 2004 - 2006, which was sponsored by English Heritage and managed by the two County Councils involved. Dr Fairless outlined how, by methodical and meticulous study of prehistoric rock art in the two counties, the NADRAP aimed to build upon and incorporate the Newcastle University Beckensall Archive and compare the findings of the project to what was already documented.

An example of the very detailed recording criteria was shown to the group - measurement, orientation, landscape, features, weather, vegetation, photographs, scale drawings, 360deg panoramas, annotation, classification and potential threat - all had to be recorded for each and every rock art site. It soon became clear that it was a huge undertaking.

Dr Fairless invited the audience to ponder four questions relating to what is generally called "rock art" -

What do we see?

Where is it?

When might it have been done?

Why was it done?

and then via slides, sketches, diagrams and plans he began to reveal and explore possible answers relating to some of these enigmatic symbols.

He showed how many different abstract designs appear to make up what is known as "rock art" including simple circular hollows (cups), single rings, concentric circles, grooves, spirals, annular designs, channels, rectangles, chevrons and lozenges.

Some are in locations near to ancient burial sites, some on standing stones such as Long Meg, some appear on isolated rocks or outcrops, some near to water features - wherever they are found they are intriguing.

He went on to explain that dating rock art is not easy. Whilst it is generally accepted that most of the designs were created by Neolithic and Bronze Age people it is difficult to suggest a precise date as the Neolithic and Bronze Age eras themselves span several thousand years. The abstract designs provide few clues and even where one design overlies another it only tells us that a less-weathered design is likely to be younger than the one beneath it - but can't be actually dated.

Despite extensive study and research we still don't really know the answer to why the designs were created - early maps, boundary markers, a form of written communication, family symbols, astronomical representations, artistic endeavour, passing an idle moment... there are many suggestions as to why they were pecked out at some effort - probably with antlers or other stones- but really we still have no idea.

Dr Fairless ended the talk by showing slides of some complex rock art panels in Teesdale, Northumberland, Yorkshire and Cumbria.

Several members were impressed by slides showing the results of a process known as photogrammetry - the very accurate measurement of archaeological features based on digital stereo-photography which allows a 3D representation of the design to be presented in different ways and whereby a specific aspect of the rock art can be enhanced and studied in depth.

Dr Fairless was warmly applauded and answered questions from the Group members.

The next meeting will be at 7.30pm Tuesday 10th April in the Supper Room when Paul Frodsham will give an update on the "Altogether Archaeology" project - visitors welcome.