

Neolithic visual culture: abstraction and figuration

British Museum, London – 8 November 2010

10.30	Welcome	Tim Darvill
10.35	Introduction	Andy Jones and Andrew Cochrane
10.45	Recent research on the rock art of Cumbria and Northumbria	Kate Sharpe
11.05	Rock art excavations at Torbhlaren and Ormaig, Kilmartin, Argyll	Andy Jones – presented by Davina Freedman
11.25	Rock art excavations on Ben Lawers, Perthshire	Richard Bradley & Aaron Watson
11.45	An experience of Neolithic imagery	Andrew Cochrane
12.05	New discoveries of Neolithic art at Brodgar Farm, Orkney	Nick Card
12.25	Discussion	
12.55	Lunch (make your own arrangements)	
14.00	Recent analyses of Irish passage tomb art	Guillame Robin
14.20	Passage tomb art and rock art at Loughcrew, Co. Meath, Ireland	Elizabeth Shee Twohig
14.40	Passage tomb art in the Channel Islands, with a focus on Guernsey	Sheila Köhring
15.00	Tea	
15.20	Rock art and the Iberian Neolithic	Lara Bacelar Alves
15.40	Figurines and the Linearbandkeramik	Daniela Hofmann
16.00	Discussion	(Discussant: David Robinson)
16.55	Close	

ABSTRACTS FOR THE NEOLITHIC STUDIES 8th NOVEMBER MEETING

Neolithic visual culture: abstraction and figuration

Organisers: Dr. Andy Jones (University of Southampton) and Dr. Andrew Cochrane (UEA)

Reading between the grooves. Variation and context in the rock art of Northern England

Kate Sharpe (Durham University, UK/NADRAP, English Heritage)

The 'cup and ring' style of rock art found across Northern Britain and Ireland is often discussed as a single tradition of abstract motifs pecked onto natural rock surfaces. Closer scrutiny reveals that the growing corpus of ca. 6,000 panels is far from homogeneous. The emerging picture is complex, with subtle variations suggested both within and between regional clusters. Small-scale studies and preliminary observations indicate preferred combinations of motifs and arrangements on the rock surface, variations in the choice of 'canvas', and diverse relationships between the carved stones and the surrounding landscape. Considered alongside panel distributions and the evolving significance of the rock art over the extended period during which it was fashioned, used, and re-used, these trends could reveal much about the social context in which the carvings were created, and their role in creating and maintaining community identity.

Over the last 5 years working on rock art in Cumbria, Northumberland, and County Durham I have become aware of the variation and distinctive features present across Northern England. This paper then, considers a cross-section of rock art clusters, from the Irish Sea coast, across the Lakeland Fells, the Eden Valley, over the Pennines, and into the Fell Sandstones of the North East. The range of styles and contexts revealed hint at the possibility of aligning this variation with social and cultural trends inferred from other archaeological evidence. With the improved, more consistent data now becoming available, the rock art could be an integral part of an extended context in which to explore the evolving relationships between prehistoric communities and their social and natural worlds. Analysis of subtle nuances in content, form, composition, and execution, and correlation with their occurrence in dated contexts may potentially contribute to the challenge of developing an improved chronology.

Rock art and prehistoric landscapes: excavations at the rock art sites of Torbhlaren, Argyll

Andrew Jones (University of Southampton, UK)

The rock art sites at Torbhlaren are located in the Kilmichael Glen, part of the wider Kilmartin landscape. The two major rock art sites at Torbhlaren were the focus of

excavations between 2004 and 2009. The rock art sites are associated with deposits of quartz hammerstones, and other lithic materials. In addition there is also a prehistoric structure associated with one of the sites. This paper will review this archaeological and environmental evidence and the radiocarbon dates associated with the sites, and on the basis of this, will discuss the relationship between rock art and the monumental landscape of Kilmartin.

Excavations on a loud mountain

Richard Bradley (University of Reading, UK) and Aaron Watson (www.monumental.com)

Ben Lawers (Perthshire) is the tenth highest mountain in Britain. On its lower slopes there is an unusual concentration of rock carvings. One group provided the focus for small-scale excavation between 2007 and 2010. The site is on the 400 metre contour and is located well away from any monuments of the Neolithic period, and yet the decorated outcrops were associated with deposits of flaked and broken quartz as well as a few other artefacts. This paper discusses the methods used in fieldwork, the environmental evidence from the site, and the relationship between the carved surfaces and elements of the surrounding landscape.

Colour, process and form: Neolithic art from the Ness of Brodgar

Nick Card and Antonia Thomas (University of the Highlands and Islands, Orkney, UK)

Orkney differs from many areas of the UK in that there are no known examples of open air rock-art, but there is a substantial and largely overlooked resource of structure-related Neolithic art. The range of prehistoric designs is highly unusual with styles often considered mutually exclusive occurring together. At the Ness of Brodgar a wide range of art has been recovered from secure stratigraphic contexts, with colourful painted geometric designs found alongside finely incised motifs and elaborately pecked stones. These discoveries have the potential to radicalise studies of the process, chronology and development of Neolithic art, in Orkney and beyond.

An experience of Neolithic imagery

Andrew Cochrane (University of East Anglia, UK)

Approaches to Neolithic passage tomb imagery in Ireland have been dominated by representational thinking. As such, some have posited that the non-representational geometric motifs can be read, decoded and sometimes deciphered as a text. More nuanced approaches have been influenced by structuralism and deconstructionist literary writings. Featured in many narratives is the premise that passage tomb motifs allude to or conceal previously unseen and unknown

knowledges/worlds/realities. There are ample modern anthropological and ethnographic examples to support or disrupt these arguments. My interest here, however, is how such approaches reflect a state of affairs in the contemporary West - the idea that invisible facades do exist - and that research can reach beyond them. Instead, I want to return to the images themselves and consider their compositions and presentations. Since the Neolithic as we understand it is a modern creation, as a conceit, I will examine some examples of contemporary imagery to explore how we might experience Neolithic imagery.

The figurative part of an abstract Neolithic iconography: hypotheses and directions of research in Irish passage tomb art

Guillaume Robin (University of Sassari, Italy)

Whatever their degree of abstraction, many traditions of abstract art throughout the world have a part of figuration; however, this part clearly appears only if the meaning of the art is still known or discovered. This is not the case for British and Irish Neolithic art and only examinations of its context can give some indications. Recent analyses of Irish passage tomb art have shown that specific graphic forms were spatially associated with architectural components of the tombs. These results allow us to bring new interpretations of passage tomb art and consequently to re-evaluate the figurative part of this abstract iconography.

Visual Culture at Loughcrew Co. Meath: rock art and passage tomb art

Elizabeth Shee Twohig (Research Associate, Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, Ireland)

This paper will provide a brief overview of a number of recently recorded examples of rock art on earthfast boulders which are located on the northern and western slopes of the Loughcrew hills. These are additional to the rock art already known on the Ballinvalley plateau north of the hills.

As this is effectively the only place where passage tomb art and rock art occur in the same locale, these new discoveries provide an opportunity to compare the two forms, and to discuss their relationship, the big questions being the sequence in which the two sets of carvings were created and their role in society.

Stepping stones: Visual technologies, communities of practice and representation on Guernsey, Channel Islands.

Sheila Kohring (University of Cambridge, UK)

Technologies of representation reflect communities and social networks through their use and integration in specific landscapes, creating a sense of self and other. This paper presents a new analysis of the visual representation on Guernsey, Channel Islands. Neolithic visual representation is rare, but several examples suggest strong links to the Breton coast and wider integration in social networks by the end of the Neolithic. Furthermore, the burial chambers and early stelae create a context for later representation, linking the Guernsey community not only into wider traditions but also establishing their own sense of identity through specific historical trajectories and references.

Eternal symbols? The circle, the cross and the limits of abstract and figurative art in the Iberian Neolithic.

Lara Bacelar Alves (University of Porto, Portugal)

The circle and the cross may be seen as paradoxical images. They are also the elementary visual forms that typify two major prehistoric rock art traditions in Western Iberia: Atlantic Art and Schematic Art. The former, which distribution is confined to north-west regions, is materialised as open air carvings in granite outcrops, showing mainly abstract and curvilinear motifs yet, subnaturalistic figures of animals and weapons are also present and may be intrusive in the diachronic sequence. The latter is more widespread across Iberia and is characterised by paintings in rock shelters or small caves. It mainly features schematic human figures and geometric designs based on crossed lines. However, the meeting point between these apparently contrasting traditions, two quite distinct forms of visual expression, may be found on the wider significance of carving and painting on rocks. The relationship between rock art and passage grave art shall also be addressed.

In this paper, the limits between Atlantic and Schematic art, abstraction and figuration, are discussed at a chronological, geographical, stylistic and, more importantly, conceptual levels. It ultimately intends to raise questions on how Atlantic and Mediterranean cosmologies merge towards the fringes of their (cultural and natural) environment in the Neolithic.

A plea for context: human representations in central Europe Daniela Hoffman (University of Oxford, UK)

Recent theoretical contributions on figurine studies have sidelined archaeological context: figures should be appreciated in terms of their visual and tactile qualities, not in terms of what they might 'mean' to past societies. This approach is powerful, but I argue we should not give up on context just yet. A brief look at Linearbandkeramik and lake village human representations reveals the blurring between the abstract and representational and between kinds of objects, ideas also echoed in burial rites. Neither situation is directly analogous to the British Neolithic, but they problematise the kinds of worlds in which representational art may be important.