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Abbildung Titelseite:

Ein Großteil der prähistorischen Grabmäler von Lanzarote (Kanarische Inseln) verfügt über ein sogenanntes Seelenloch. Das hier gezeigte Beispiel aus der Gegend von Máguez gehört zu den wenigen Bautypen mit Mittelstein, die siebenteilig und zugleich symmetrisch angeordnet sind und deren Tubus die Unsterblichkeit des Verbliebenen bei dessen Nachtod-Aktionen unterstützt. (Photo: Hans-Joachim Ulbrich)

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Mark Milburn

Similar finds in North Britain and the Sahara: the enigmatic keyhole form

Keywords: Cup, Rings and Groove; keyhole; CRG; fading; heel-shaped cairn

Abstract:

However ancient the Cup, Rings and Groove design may be and its meaning long ago, with evidence of its existence in many areas, its form to-day seems remarkably similar to one shown by a current spiritual organisation. A birds-eye view of this so-called "Tube of Light" design shows possession of several concentric rings. A cup is apparently the starting point of a modern printed area reaching downwards towards the base and covering the part which could hold a straight groove.

The form of the Cup, Rings and Groove carving design is well-known to many British observers and needs very little description (**Fig. 1**). There can exist as many as six rings and sometimes only one.

So far as I am aware, such carved symbols have been mainly studied in northern England and many parts of Scotland, especially by S. Beckensall and R.W.B. Morris, as well as in north-west Spain (Bradley, 1996: 35 & 37), northern Portugal and the Carschenna site in the Swiss Graubünden canton (H. Biedermann 1977: 76, Bild 74 and in litt, 1976). Their condition has often deteriorated considerably from that shown in photos taken years ago. Older books can be purchased, but their illustrations often no longer show the present condition of many carvings. This will have been a disappointment to countless visitors.

Since the age of ancient remains is always of interest, all the more so when it is unknown, a recent opinion (autumn 2020) tells us that the carvings are Neolithic (New Stone Age), without further details.

The reason for the existence of British Cup, Rings and Groove symbols has been suggested by numerous authors, although I am unaware that anyone has truly succeeded in detecting it hitherto. One view was that the straight line / groove was directed towards another site nearby; a geographer then asserted that the sites were not mutually visible in the wooded country long ago. Another writer felt that a short groove might point towards other sites, its length indicating whether nearby or far off. Meanwhile it does not look as though the groove favours any obvious known orientation.

At this point we may note that the general appearance of a CRG (Cup, Rings and Groove) carving viewed from above is somewhat similar to that of a keyhole monument ("monument en trou de serrure" (**Fig. 2**), although no physical metal keyhole will have existed so long ago. It seems probable that these, and many other structures, were intended to be seen from the sky. Some very small keyhole-like carvings were seen by S. Beckensall (1983:120 & 124) inside the so-called Weetwood Cairn and another almost adjacent. Most are said to be in Berwick-upon-Tweed Museum, with one having been requested by the Science Museum, London (Beckensall, 2001:129). The sketched and photographed objects look clear enough, although the reason for the existence of the tiny keyhole-shapes is unknown (**Fig. 3**). Excavation in the same monument produced an unusual Y-shaped carving on the pillar mentioned below (Beckensall, 1983:121).

A recent text (Oksanen et al. 2020, 109) has recalled the existence of the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Britain. There must be countless similar CRG carvings lying around in odd places, especially private gardens, as well as built into walls after about 1800 AD, which have probably escaped being documented in the scheme. The same situation applies to thousands of Stone Age artefacts used in prominent cairns erected as route-markers along sandy Saharan tracks, plus innumerable Neolithic querns and their hand-stones temporarily used by later nomads and finally abandoned. Perhaps millions of prehistoric artefacts now lying on Saharan sand come in the same category.

In 2000 Timothy Darvill and other specialists wrote a magnificent treatise on British rock art with an enormous bibliography. Some years later he and a colleague published a book (Darvill et al., 2014:i). On the very first page can be read that most of the work "being done appears to be ad hoc, with minimal communication among teams and with the wider archaeological community". Could it be that a great deal of wisdom from the 2000 treatise may never have been heeded in the rush to gain personal publicity?

Some excellent remarks by R. Bradley (2010: xi, in Barnett & Sharp, 2010) include the difficulty of trying to use abstract British carvings to illustrate daily life during Prehistory and the opinion of professionals that rock art can be left to amateurs. The current emphasis lies in recording rather than interpretation and there exists extraordinary reluctance to look beneath the ground surface, plus an emphasis on management that presupposes what needs to be managed and why. There is no mention of fading. From my own experience in Northumberland, these remarks seem to apply especially to members of the ICCH (International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies), University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

In Scandinavia in the spring months interdisciplinary experts were already uncovering carvings depicting ships and covering them in the winter season to try to preserve them. The contrast between procedures between Britain and Scandinavia could hardly have been greater. I have been greatly assisted by the kindness and enthusiasm of a Norwegian geologist, O. Walderhaug (1998), whose pithy comments about heritage authorities and archaeologists ignorant of the behaviour of stone explain a great deal.

Further useful remarks by him are as follows: "quite a few archaeologists do not like non-archaeologists, or other archaeologists for that matter, doing good work on rock carvings". It seems, "that within archaeology it is often a case of denying others access to some site or material in order to be the only one able to publish about it. Or at least prevent others publishing and getting any credit for this."

Moreover, many archaeologists do not like to admit that "*weathering of rock art is a problem belonging to the natural sciences*", or that a rock with carvings is just another piece of rock when it comes to chemical and geological processes. (Owald, in litt., 25 June 2009)

In 2004 Northumbrian rock carvings at Hunterheugh beneath a tumulus were laid bare by professionals and never covered up again (Waddington et al., 2005). These faded considerably as a result. In 2018 the same article appeared in full yet again in a work edited by two authors, one of whom had also been involved in the 2005 text (Nash & Mazel, 2018). It may just be that perhaps even today none of the professional archaeologists concerned with both publications have realized that they should have covered up the carvings laid bare by excavation in 2004.

On 12 August 2012 C.A. Burgess, the County Archaeologist of Northumberland, and a specialist in medieval archaeology, wrote me that "No intervention intended to preserve rock carvings appears to interest the university". I wondered whether this failure was due to policy of the Northumberland and Durham Rock Art Project (NADRAP) or to simple lack of funding to train the specialists for such work.

Some further seemingly light-hearted text came on 15 August 2013 in a document titled "Working Together in the Care of Rock Art" (<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/heritage-science>). Addressed to owners or users of rock art, it went on to say that "you are in a unique position to be able to ensure this vital and irreplaceable part of history can be in existence for future generations". Compare the title of Barnett & Sharpe (2010).

In June 2013 a previous note by the ICCHS, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, read "People think rocks are permanent and because rock art seems to

have been there a very long time, it will last forever. Sadly this is not the case".

However the following text provides food for doubt: "Press Office Newcastle University. Preserving rock art at the touch of a button. 23 November 2017. Some of the world's most ancient art could be protected with a new app designed by Newcastle University heritage and software experts".

One interesting statement, that may put some previous texts in perspective, is that "Professional archaeologists view history as a means of telling a good story to sell archaeologically commercially. But this is not what heritage is about." (Welsh, 2011: 15)

An unusual "Y-shaped" carving was also excavated within the so-called Weetwood Cairn in Northumberland (Beckensall, 1983:121) and set up as a standing stone facing about south. Beckensall apparently did not know danger of fading of uncovered carvings at the time and nor did I. It finally faded away around the end of 2013. A rather similar carving occurred several hundred metres off about 200 metres to south at a site called Weetwood Bank 2, nowadays extremely faded.

Next I wish to mention the chances of inexplicable memory and possible tradition of reincarnation going back to a former life versus the damage caused by so-called vandals who deliberately alter pictures to suit their own perverted taste. Risking the chances of leaving out Reality at this point, it is probable that vandals are seldom caught. Hence the relative futility of "scheduling" sites, a mere bureaucratic process formerly applied by the now extinct organisation English Heritage. But could it be that some locals or even strangers from Wisconsin, Honolulu or south Devon may feel themselves to be in some way related to particular sites, often during their first and only visit? May they even resent any inhibitions imposed by desk-bound authorities (as a result of behaviour by vandals quite unfamiliar with self-discipline in the countryside?). Possibly they experience hitherto unknown emotions when contemplating enigmatic symbols on rock in a lonely place.

Two sites known to me have displayed CRG carvings later altered by persons unknown. The latter one was only temporary and reverted to its original form in due course after periodic observation kindly effected by an expert observer, Joe Gibson. It was he who provided information on the faded rock carvings at Hunterheugh. See above.

The thoughts above have occurred to me while in rock art country, say in the Sahara and quite alone. Elsewhere tendencies to knock down a fence or even to fell a tree appear to occur in populated areas where people may be frustrated at being by inability to make photos on land possibly occupied by their ancestors long ago.

At this point I want to look at one desert area over a hundred kilometres north of Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. Not far off were seen two cup, rings and groove carvings on a long ridge during 1978/79 (Milburn 1990, 260 and Milburn, 2011; Figs. 16-18). **(Fig. 4)**. They appeared quite atypical of numerous other carvings adjacent, they were basically lighter in patina than others and I have seen nothing similar anywhere to south of the Mediterranean. Before we delve any further into their authenticity it is vital for expert geologists or similar specialists to examine them minutely and give their opinion.

Coming again to some well-known structures in the central and southern Sahara known as Keyhole Monuments, the reason for this name is obvious. Their length of up to about 100 metres makes them clearly visible from the sky. Their corridors are basically orientated somewhere between about 63 to 165 degrees in the Fadnoun area (Savary, 1964:46) and have been thought to indicate the date of death of the occupant. **(Fig. 2)**. These structures are found in the Algerian regions of Ahaggar and Tassili-n-Ajjer, in western Niger Republic and parts of Libya. Rather similar burial structures, probably later in date, are the so-called Goulets of Immidir (Algeria), West Sahara and southern Morocco (Sáenz et al, 2014). **(Fig. 5)**. A long goulet may have stone paving in part or the whole area of the two basic "wings".

Since the orientation of Keyhole Monuments has been noted above, it is just worth providing a few words on heel-shaped cairns (HSCs), existing in Scotland and the Sahara. It should be mentioned in passing that these undated structures **(Fig. 6)** have been noted in Shetland (Henshall, 1963, 148) and that their orientation seems to show a preference for about south-east. In the Central Sahara I found examples whose predominant heading could be between NE and SE (Milburn, 1977: 155). I once spent a night beside a low hill in Immidir, Algeria, with a small HSC perched on its summit. The next morning, on 18 December 1978, the rising sun landed right on part of the structure (Engl-jähringer et al., 1986: 16). I much appreciated A. Henshall having listened so patiently to my tales of the Saharan cairns and R. Morris for having initially showed me her fascinating book near Glasgow. The similarity between the Shetland structures and those seen in Algeria is extraordinary.

Even if the following query may risk classification as "infotainment", could it be that the "keyhole-like" layout of CRGs and Saharan keyhole stone monuments ("monuments en trou de serrure") represented a common belief or superstition?

However ancient the Cup, Rings and Groove design may be and what it may have meant long ago, with evidence of its existence in many areas, its form to-day can safely said to be remarkably similar to that shown by a current

spiritual organisation. Only on 26 November 2020 did this suddenly occur to me, many years after the enigma of the Cup, Rings and Groove design had been staring me in the face for some years. I must leave detailed explanation of its meaning and learned comment to genuine modern experts.

Draft description: A birds-eye view of this so-called "Tube of Light" design would show that it possesses several concentric rings. A cup is apparently the starting point of a modern printed area reaching downwards towards the base and thus covering the part which could hold a straight groove.

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Illustrations:

- Fig. 1. Cup, Rings and Groove carving (after Biedermann 1977).
- Fig. 2. Keyhole monument. The keyhole form is clearly visible within an outer border surrounding the whole complex.
- Fig. 3. Small keyhole carvings in north Britain. The shape of some of these fascinating designs appears most unusual (after Beckensall).
- Fig. 4. Algerian Cup, Rings and Groove carving.
- Fig. 5. Goulet.
- Fig. 6. Heel-shaped cairn (after Henshall).

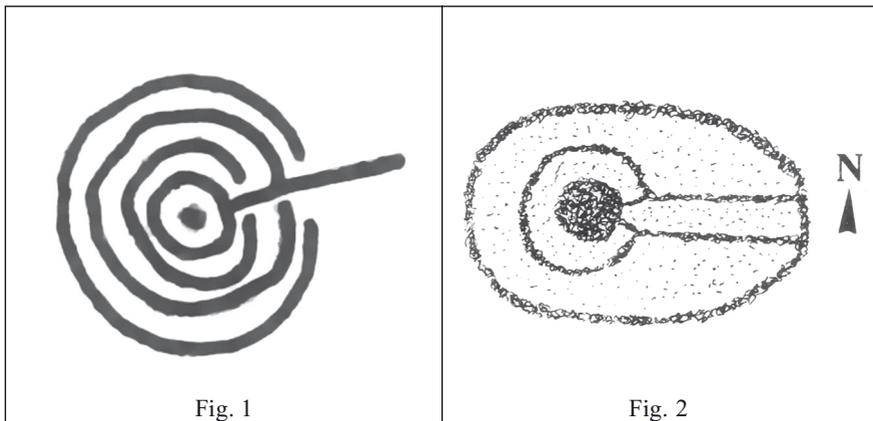




Fig. 3



Fig. 4

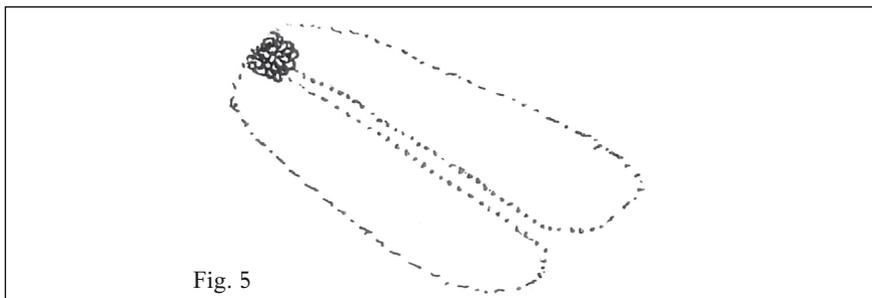


Fig. 5

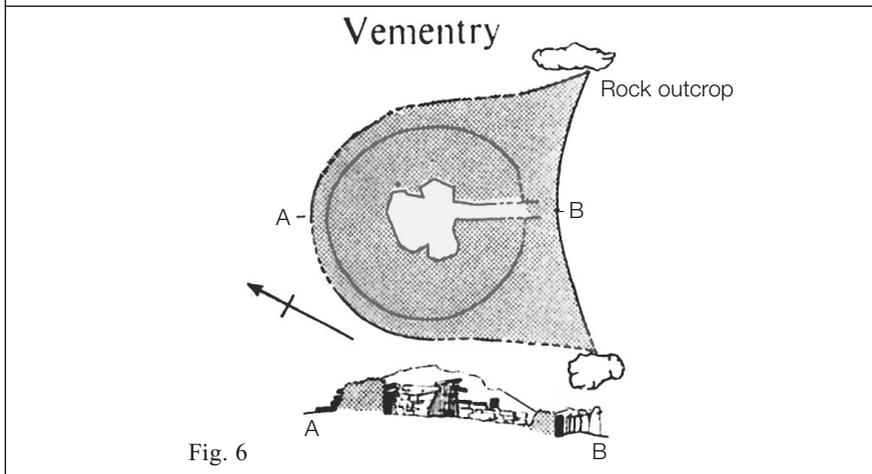


Fig. 6