

INSCRIBED STONES IN DUNBARTONSHIRE

By R. W. B. Morris

MAN'S carvings and markings on stone are probably among his most ancient and enduring pre-historic remains in Britain. Some of the simplest of these carvings, and so perhaps in some cases the oldest, consist of cup and ring markings. These are cups or hollows, often about two inches deep and about one inch across, and rings—often true circles and often concentric with a cup in the centre—incised on stone surfaces. The ring incisions are generally less than half an inch deep.

Markings of this kind have been found in many countries as well as Britain and some antiquarians in the past have believed that many at least of the markings may have a common origin and import. Nothing definite is known, however, and they have suggested this merely for such reasons as (*a*) the markings found in widely separated areas bear strong similarities to each other and (*b*) often one finds many similar markings grouped together, not only on the same stone but also (in different combinations) on adjoining rocks and in the rocks of a particular area. Thus the markings on the stone at Greenland Farm, Dunbartonshire shown in fig. 1 (National Grid 435746) are very much in the same style as other markings on a stone 100 yards away and also on other stones scattered roughly in an east-west line several miles long in the county; and they are also strangely similar to those found, for example, on a granite boulder at Forsyth County, Georgia, U.S.A., illustrated in Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 1874-76 (fig. 2).

The markings in Dunbartonshire all bear a strong similarity to each other and are all at least 250 feet above present sea level. This suggests a possible date of about 2000 B.C. when the water level was much higher. But many carvings in other areas exist at lower levels. In no case in this area, and, according to Professor Simpson, in practically no case in Western Europe do the rocks bearing cup and ring markings also bear more complex carvings,

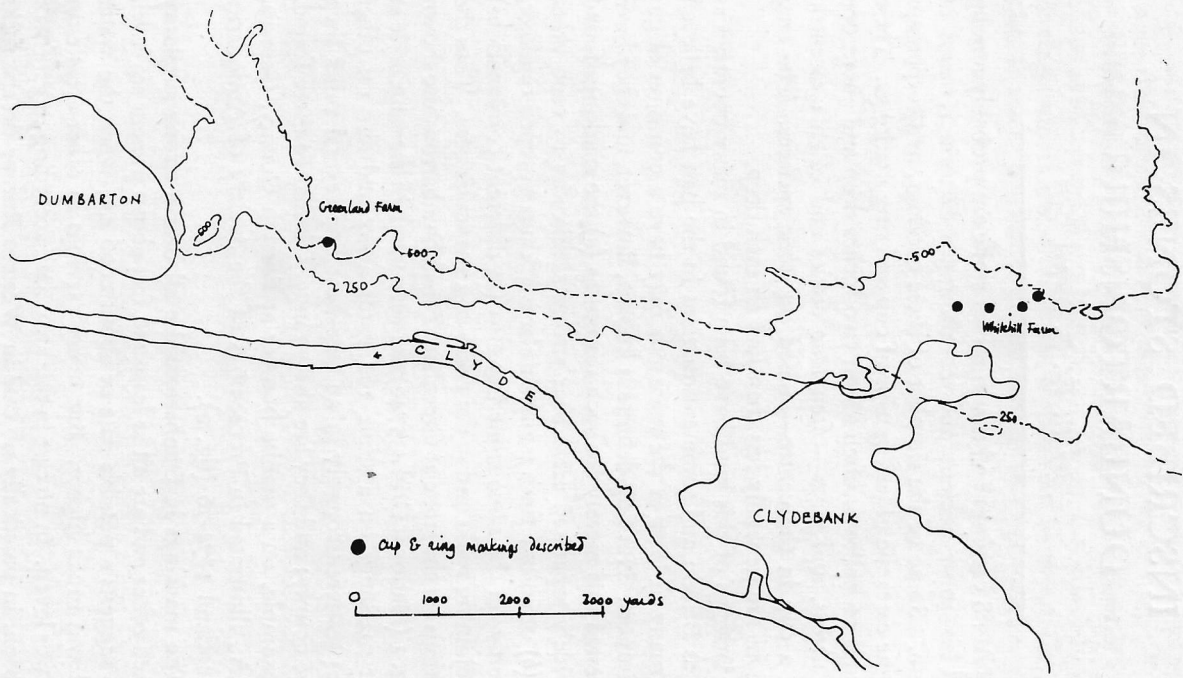


FIG. 1. Sketch map.

ornamentation or inscriptions. The very simplicity of these types of sculptures is one strong reason for our regarding them as the most ancient carvings that have been left to us in Britain.

Many theories have been formed as to the meaning, date and origin of these markings, but no really satisfactory explanation has yet been given. So far as the present writer can trace no general article on the subject, in Scotland at least, has been written since Sir James Simpson, M.D., wrote of them in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for 1865/66. In the hundred years since then, although many other cup and ring markings have been found in Scotland, no general survey of these appears to have been made.

It is now proposed to carry out such a survey. As a beginning all the existing sites known to the writer in Dunbartonshire have been visited and examined, and where necessary have been re-excavated to some extent. A previously unrecorded site in a field adjoining Cochno Road at Whitehill Farm, Clydebank (National Grid 508738) has been excavated. On a slab of rock which was uncovered there were found (fig. 3) four concentric rings with a central deep cup, the outermost ring measuring eight inches in diameter, and another series of two concentric rings with a cup in the centre, the outer ring being four inches across. On a large flat rock slab in a woodland site on the same farm (National Grid 512738) where a cup and ring marking was previously exposed and marked on the O.S. map, a number of other such marks have been found when the surface soil and vegetation were removed. The largest of these marks is thirteen inches across, comprising four concentric rings with a central cup. Further still to the north east in a large rock outcrop, several examples of cups and rings, also unrecorded, have been found: one example is illustrated at fig. 5.

Another cup and ring marked stone in the adjoining district is the Cochno Stone (National Grid 504738), well-known locally, which is being much worn by foot traffic. As will be seen from the site plan fig. 4, all these Dunbartonshire markings lie in a nearly straight line parallel to the Clyde, and above the 250 feet contour.

These cup and ring markings are to be found in Scotland on isolated flat and other rocks and stones, sloping at all angles from horizontal to vertical, on stones of megalithic circles and cromlechs and in caves formerly used as dwellings and also both on the insides and on the outsides of ancient dwellings and stone coffins, the lids of urns, and elsewhere. Some have obviously been moved from their original sites and used, for example, as garden decorations and stones in recent house-building.

At Clydebank, Dunbartonshire, excavations have been carried out by the author in conjunction with Dr. Fairhurst, Head of the Department of Archaeology at Glasgow University and Mr. Douglas C. Bailey, on the part of the field at Whitehill Farm referred to in last year's Report, and in a nearby wooded area. On the first site a rock has been uncovered bearing four concentric rings and a central cup, the outermost ring measuring eight inches in diameter, and another series of two concentric rings with a cup in the centre, the outer ring being four inches across.

In the woodland site on a large flat rock slab there are a number of cup and ring markings, the largest of which is thirteen inches across and comprises four concentric rings with a central cup. These have not previously been recorded, although the farmer discovered the largest ring series some years ago and stopped some quarrying near by to preserve it.

The author is making a further study of cup and ring markings on these sites and four other sites in this area of Dunbartonshire. The markings in this area bear a strong similarity to each other, are all at least 250 feet above present sea level. In no case in this area, and in practically no case in Scotland do the rocks bearing cup-and-ring markings also bear more complex carvings, ornamentation or inscriptions. There is some reason for regarding them as among the most ancient carvings that have been left to us in Britain. So far no successful attempt has been made to date them or to discover their original meaning or what people or race inscribed them. Although there are other markings nearer sea level, the fact that all the Dunbartonshire series are at least 250 feet above sea level might indicate a date about 2000 B.C., when



FIG. 2. Cups and rings recently found north-east of Whitehill farm.



FIG. 3. Cups and rings recently uncovered by the roadside west of Whitehill farm.



FIG. 4. Cups and rings near Greenhill farm.

the water level was much higher. Any information which members can give the writer on cup-and-ring markings in their areas—if possible with O.S. Map References—will be welcome for purposes of comparison, and may be sent to Mr. Morris at Quarter, Kilmacolm, Scotland.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. Fairhurst, Professor of Archaeology at Glasgow University, and the team of helpers he brought with him to take charge of the excavations of the Whitehall site; and also to Mr. Douglas C. Bailey, O.B.E., for his diagrams and his indefatigable co-operation.

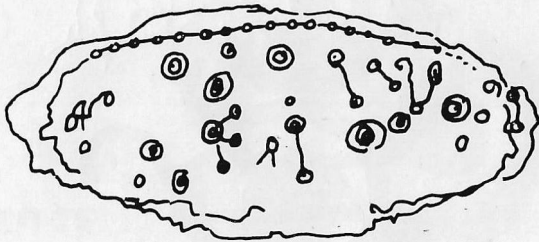


FIG. 5. Cups and rings on a boulder in Georgia, U.S.A.