

DISCOVERY OF A CUPMARKED STONE ON THE BOUNDARY OF TAI'R WAUN ISAF AND TAI'R WAUN UCHAF, LLANFABON, MID-GLAMORGAN (NGR ST 10220 93489)

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Introduction

Within the uplands of South Wales, around the valley towns of Caerphilly, Nelson and Pontypridd is an extensive later prehistoric landscape that includes a variety of extant monuments including burial-ritual barrows and cairns, single and multiple standing stones (monoliths), stone circles and occasionally Neolithic stone chambered burial monuments (Children and Nash 1996; RCAHMW 1976). Over the past ten years or so, engraved rock art from this period of prehistory has also been found, usually in association with extant stone monuments that date from the Late Neolithic to the Middle to Late Bronze Age (Evans 2022). One such discovery, reported in June 2022 by Ian Jenkins and landowner Kim Allen is a large sandstone rectangular boulder that has engraved on its upper face over 93 cupmarks. The site was later verified by the author and Cadw inspector Dr Jonathan Berry. Baseline information, including LiDAR imagery and historic mapping was supplied by Ian Jenkins. The fieldwork, including a photographic record, was undertaken in September and December 2022 with a desire to Schedule the site. It is considered by the author that the site is of national importance and therefore any development proposals associated with this site require careful assessment, mitigation and monitoring.

The two fieldwork sessions ascertained:

- the presence of later prehistoric rock art
- the potential date range of the rock art (are there other sites within the vicinity?)
- the motif-type and style of rock art
- the relationship between rock art and the various landscape vistas (setting)
- the potential of the site being the capstone of a Neolithic burial-ritual monument.

Landscape context

The site stands on a boundary between two farmsteads: Tai'r waun Isaf (west) and Tai'r waun uchaf (east) and comprises a large fine-grained laminated sandstone boulder that stands on the western side of an historic trackway that extends from a lane that links the two farmsteads (Figure 1). The boulder is incorporated into a north-south low turf and stone banked boundary, a section of which has been rebuilt in recent times and stands to the north and forms the western line of a medieval or post-medieval track that leads to enclosed rectilinear fields to the south. Both farmsteads, the surviving field system and the ancient trackways are

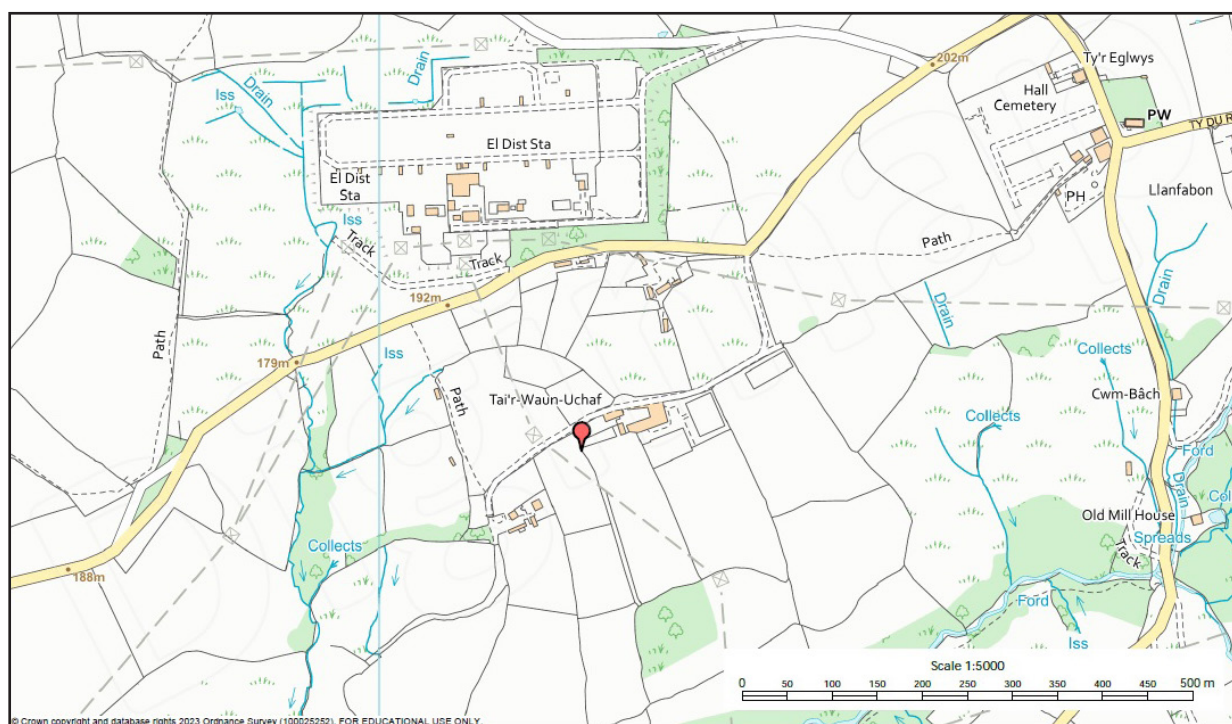


Figure 1: Site location based on 1:50000 OS map sheet 171 (© Crown copyright and database rights 2023 Ordnance Survey)

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Figure 2: Site location on the Ordnance Survey 6" map of 1921 Glamorgan Sheet XXVIII (© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited 2023)

present on historic mapping (e.g. the 1921 OS map: Figure 2).

In terms of topography, the site stands at the head of a valley to the southwest at around 190m AOD. The site is located on a gradual SW slope, on a small plateau, and is not on the highest point within the landscape. The landscape falls away to form a U-shaped valley to the south. Dispersed across the valley and the immediate landscape is a sub-rectangular field system and wooded areas which form around the Nant Ddu to the west and Nant Cae-dudwg to the south and east. Between the site and the base of the valley, the land drops 50-60m.

Site description

The stone measures $c 3.60 \times 2.85$ m and is embedded into the surrounding substrate; however, the thickest exposure forms the eastern section of the stone. According to the British Geological Survey, the underlying bedrock comprises fine-grained Pennant Sandstone formations with intermittent thin coal seams. Inspection of the weathered cupmarked stone suggests that it was locally sourced. The [horizontal]

laminated geology of the stone is revealed in the weathered eastern and western sides of the stone (Figures 3 to 5). The stone is located along the boundary of the two farmsteads, partially delineated by a wire fence. To the south of the stone and west of the linear boundary is a potential cairn spread which is mirrored by the local topography of the field.



Figure 4: The Tai'r waun Isaf Stone, looking NNE (Image G H Nash)



Figure 3: The Tai'r waun Isaf Stone and associated cairn, looking NNW (Image G H Nash)



Figure 5: Side-on view of the Tai'r waun Isaf Stone showing laminations, looking WNW (Image G H Nash)



Figure 6: View of the upper surface of the stone, enhanced by night photography, looking NW (Image G H Nash)



Figure 7: The eastern section of the upper face of the stone containing many of the deeper gouged cupmarks (Image G H Nash)

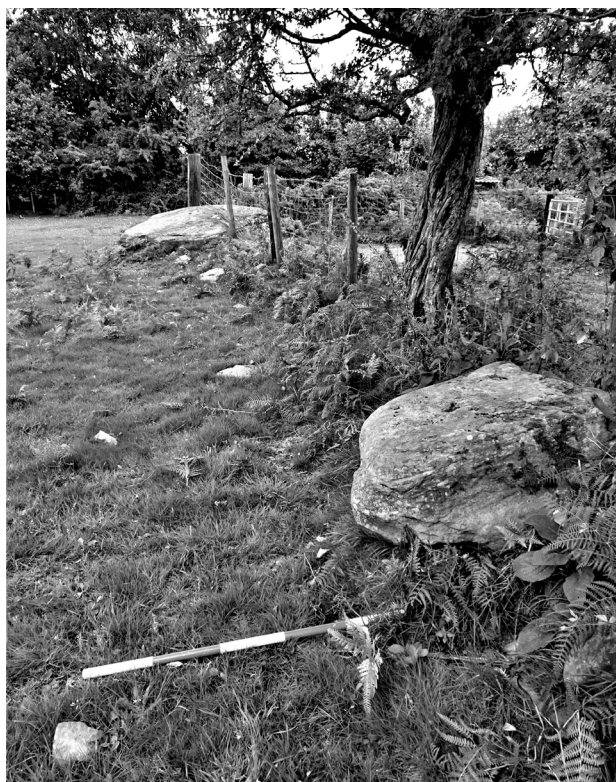


Figure 8: One of two large stone outliers that are incorporated into the same boundary as the Tai'r waun Isaf Stone (Image G H Nash)

Engraved on the upper face of the stone and arranged in several clusters are 93+ cupmarks (Figures 6 and 7). The motifs appear to be randomly dispersed across the upper face; however, the initial inspection did reveal several crescent patterns that were constructed from 3, 4 and 5 cupmarks. This specific pattern has been found on other monuments in Wales and the Isle of Man (Nash et al 2005). The average diameter of each cupmark is c 50mm.

Inspection of the northern side of the stone reveals evidence of damage that probably occurred after the monument fell out of use, followed by four millennia of weathering (Figure 6).

Inspection of the base of the stone (especially around its NW section), reveals that it is probably detached from the underlying bedrock. Surrounding the stone is a subtle undulating surface that contains the possible remnants of a cairn mound. Remnants of this feature exist around the western side of the stone and along the linear boundary and have been probably re-deposited in this area in order to improve the agricultural quality of the field. Incorporated into the linear boundary are several larger stones/boulders which may be associated with the monument (Figure 8). It is estimated that a mound measuring up to 14 m (N-S) by 8m (E-W) may be associated with the cupmarked stone.

Discussion

Prehistoric rock art in Wales is considered a rare occurrence with only around 170 sites currently known. Neolithic burial-ritual sites in Wales (and the borderlands) are well represented with around 240 extant monuments that are organised into nine distinct clusters (Nash 2006). Inside and outside these clusters is a rich and diverse Bronze Age presence that includes landscape monuments (barrows, cairns, standing stones) and, pertinent to this discussion, open-air rock art sites in the form of cupmarked boulders, outcrops and stones. The Tai'r waun Isaf Stone could fit into either one of these monument types and could be Neolithic or Bronze Age. There are, of course, several potential parallels with other monuments that possess multiple cupmarks. One of the earliest references to prehistoric cupmarked stones in Wales and the borderlands is the work of J.Y. Simpson (1867) who references the Neolithic portal dolmen of Bachwen, Gwynedd, and the destroyed Calderstones Neolithic passage grave monument in Liverpool. The capstone of the Bachwen monument is covered with at least 112 cupmarks and several engraved grooves/lines, while the Calderstones site, comprising six upright stones is covered with at least five phases of engraving (including several panels with multiple cupmarks) (Nash and Stanford 2010).

According to Morris (1989) and Beckensall (1999), the number of rock art sites nationally numbered around 15 and included several Neolithic burial-ritual monuments (Barclodiad y Gawres and Bryn Celli Ddu, both in Ynys Môn). John Sharkey (2004) raised the number to 33 and included open-air sites that were found within the coastal areas and hinterlands of Wales, the majority dating to the Bronze Age and including mainly cupmarks on exposed rock outcrops. Following on from John Sharkey's publication, and pertinent to this paper is the fieldwork of Dewi Bowen, Dr Edith Evans, Martin Hutchinson and Ian Jenkins (to name but a few), who over the past 15 years have undertaken fieldwalking around the various open uplands around Mid-Glamorgan.

In terms of the new discovery at Tai'r waun Isaf, the author considers the site to be of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date, possibly forming part of a burial-ritual monument. Recently published research by Nash (2021, Table 1) lists up to 18 Neolithic burial-ritual monuments in Wales with prehistoric rock art, the majority of which contain single and multiple cupmarks on their uprights and upon the upper surfaces of capstones (e.g. Bachwen, Maen Catwg, Trefael, Trelyffaint and Ty Newydd). This number of burial-ritual monuments with rock art accounts for around 8% of the assemblage in Wales. The reasons why this number of sites is low is not fully understood. However, Nash has postulated that rock art may have been added to selected monuments, irrespective of their age and type at a certain point in time when symbolic and cultural influences were moving into the British Isles from Ireland and continental Europe (Daniel 1950; Nash 2006).

One questionable site that stands on nearby Gelligaer Common is Maen Catwg (NGR ST 1269 9744). This large flat stone measuring 2.6 x 1.7 m contains at least 50 weathered cupmarks of varying size upon its upper and side faces (Figure 9). According to the RCAHMW (1976) and Nash (2021), the Maen Catwg stone is probably the capstone of a destroyed Neolithic burial-ritual monument. Associated with Maen Catwg and the newly discovered Tai'r waun Isaf Stone are a number of clusters of mainly Bronze Age open-air rock art sites that occupy the rock outcropping in and around nearby Aberdare Common, Gelligaer Common and Mynydd Eglwysilan (Evans 2022). Associated with this rock art are many extant and fallen standing stones, cist burials and cairns of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date.



Figure 9: General view of Maen Catwg, looking north-east (Image G H Nash)

Concluding remarks

The Tai'r waun Isaf stone was initially considered to be simply a glacial erratic with cupmarks on its upper surface, similar to Garreg Fawr in North Wales (NGR SH 69393 73132) which measures *c.* 6.6 x 4m and contains 90+ cupmarks. This stone, with a natural spring at its eastern base appears to be orientated towards the Penmaenmawr Axe Factory and the later prehistoric settlement of Dinas, located on the north-eastern side of the Afon Llanfairfechan valley.

The author has considered that the Tai'r waun Isaf stone could also be the remains of a Neolithic burial-ritual monument, the stone forming a probable capstone. This

assumption is partially based upon the remnants of a cairn mound that surrounds the stone on its southern and western sides. A subtle earthwork does suggest that remnants of an elongated mound may exist south and west of the stone. Any survival of a mound to the north and east of the stone has been historically removed to make way for a field track.

The author, along with geophysicists Les Dodds and Phil Dell intends to survey land immediately west of the stone in early 2023. The project will comprise magnetometry and resistivity surveys and will hopefully reveal more information concerning the development and complexity of this forgotten stone and its art.

Acknowledgments

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