

Megalithic rock art discovered in Anglesey

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Spectacular megalithic rock-art has been discovered within one of Britain's most important Neolithic monuments and recorded by a team of archaeologists from the University of Bristol.

The Neolithic passage grave of Barclodiad y Gawres in Anglesey is regarded as one of the most spectacularly decorated burial monuments in Britain. The site, located on an exposed peninsula on the western side of the island was excavated between 1952 and 1953 by Terrence Powell and Glyn Daniel, who recorded the decoration of five stones.

However, further pecked art on an upright stone, located within the eastern chamber was discovered in 2001 by amateur enthusiasts Maggie and Keith Davison.

In February 2006, a team of rock-art experts from the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology visited the site and independently recorded the stone using a variety of techniques including digital photography and tracing on acetate.

The new carving consists of pecked lines arranged to create a geometric pattern. The fine pecking technique means this carving is not as clearly defined as those on other stones and has thus helped to conceal them until recently.

At first, it was thought that the art had already been recorded during the excavation but, following a detailed study of the monument, it was revealed that the original excavation team had missed this and several

other stones that contained rock-art.

The newly discovered decorated stone, referred to in Powell and Daniel's excavation report as Stone 7, forms the northern wall of the eastern chamber. The decoration on the stone comprises a series of vertical and horizontally pecked lines that form a chevron.

Several elements on this stone have similar design traits with other decorated stones within the inner passage and chamber area and with several stones that once formed a passage grave near Calderstones Park in Liverpool.

Dr George Nash of Bristol University who led the team said: "This stone, along with the other decorated stones and the way the monument architecture is designed, clearly show the importance Neolithic peoples placed on their dead. The accompanying grave goods suggest that the chamber was merely a respite before embarking on their final journey. The rock-art, similar in design to the passage grave art at Newgrange and Knowth in Ireland, was deliberately positioned in order that only certain individuals could see it.

"The activity undertaken within the chamber area would have been a mystery to the people standing outside in the façade area of the monument and the ritual secret acts played within the chamber area shared only with the dead. The rock-art would have formed an essential ingredient to the ritual performance and the way the dead were treated some 5,000 years ago."

Barclodiad y Gawres is one of three highly decorated passage grave monuments in England and Wales that date to the Late Neolithic (c. 2,500 BC). Following its excavation, the chamber and passage areas were encased in a concrete dome that plunged much of the internal architecture into darkness. Its concrete covering has also helped to create

some idea of what an enclosed monument may have looked like during its use.

The site, comprising a circular mound with passage and chamber has within its architecture six stones that have been pecked. The art consisting of concentric circles, chevrons, cupmarks, lozenges, serpentine motifs and spirals are carved on strategically placed uprights in the inner passage and chamber areas.

These designs, considered by many to represent ritual symbolic meaning, possibly have their origins in south-western Europe. The passage grave tradition, originally dating to around the mid-5th millennium BC moved northwards into a number of Neolithic core areas, where monument building was considered important. Passage grave builders erected burial monuments from enormous blocks of stone in areas such as Brittany and Ireland. It is probable that the idea to build Barclodiad y Gawres and nearby Bryn Celli Ddu came from the monument builders of central Ireland.

Source: University of Bristol

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