

## **CARVED STONES FROM BOSTON SPA**

*Paul Bowers*

Three carved stones were discovered during excavation of a prehistoric pit alignment in August of 2004 and 2005. The stones had been deposited with the carvings face down, each near the top of a separate pit. Stone 1 is a sandstone boulder, reddish brown in colour, 56 x 32 x 27cm. The stone is roughly bullet-shaped in appearance, but with one rounded and two flat facets. It was found with an uncarved sandstone boulder of similar size and another much smaller stone accompanying it. Stone 2 is similar in size, 56 x 38 x 15cm, but misshapen and lumpy, more nodule-like. It is sandy yellowish in colour and a softer calcareous marl. This stone was alone in its pit. Stone 3 is angular in appearance, but smaller, being 38 x 28 x 15cm., and a yellow sandstone. It was deposited in a pit with over twenty smaller uncarved stones of various sizes. All three stones have carvings on one face only and in each case it is the smoother face that has been carved. The carvings are composed of a series of connected scratches and grooves.

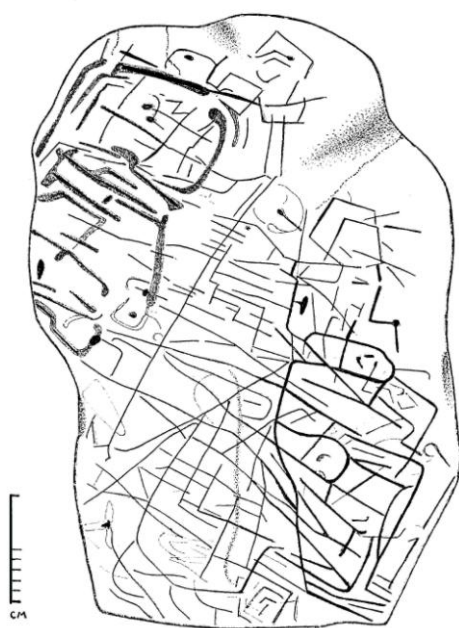
The carvings at first glance appeared to be plough scratches, until closer examination ruled this out for several reasons. The first is that the stones were buried face down in the subsoil, which is not the practice of modern farmers when finding a large stone fouling the plough. They are usually dragged off to the side or corner of the field, since this involves much less work than digging a pit. Furthermore the markings on the stones are found on one face only; one stone has deeper carvings at two opposite corners and shallow markings occupying the central area, while the other two stones have fewer carvings, spread across one surface. This does not fit the usual mode of plough damage, which, if the stones were originally near the surface, would have made deep scratches all the way across them; if a little deeper in the soil, only the uppermost portion, the centre, would have the deep scratches. This of course presumes that the stones were lying horizontally in the soil, as any other position would produce a different set of scratches at the end closest to the surface. The stones are also light enough to be pulled over by a plough, which would produce marks running over the edge onto adjacent faces. None of the above suggestions fits the markings on these stones, some of which are finely scratched as if with a sharp flint and totally unlike anything produced by modern or earlier farming implements.

### **The carvings**

The markings on Stone 1 are the more complex and fall roughly into two main categories: fine scratches and lines that are shallow, and cuts and scratches that are deeper and wider. The deeper cuts are found in two groups (when observing the stone from a viewpoint with the rounded end at the top and the flat end at the bottom), one group at the top left and one at the bottom right, with the area in between covered with the finer scratches that seem to connect or bridge the two.

The markings are nearly all linear and geometrical with only a few curves or bends. They do not appear to be random but instead show a purposeful arrangement with grids, boxes, steps or zig-zags and one possible stick figure. The two areas of deep carvings are enclosed with grooves so that the upper left looks like two open round-cornered boxes, not unlike plans of ditched enclosures; the lower right section has the

appearance of a harp, conical shell, sail or trapezoid. The central area of carving is made up of intersecting lines forming grids, steps, triangles, rectangles and some diamonds. There are also some so-called 'offsets', which consist of a straight line bisected by a group of shorter lines like a fish bone. There are several examples of these in Irish passage graves. Two or three diamond shapes are present, including one with two smaller diamonds nested inside it. This figure is incomplete and not clear, and so is open to interpretation as are many of the motifs. There is one wavy groove running down the lower central area of the stone, but this appears to be natural and is the only natural marking to be found, other than a few cracks and two or three holes. There are some anomalies such as dots and drumsticks, some part circles and a T-shape, which is part natural. There is a clear sense of arrangement with spacing and detail, and, even though they have an abstract look about them, the carvings seem deliberate and even representative, but of what is not clear. The method used in the making of these carvings seems to have been a sharp tool, probably flint (experiments have produced similar sharp lines). The deeper cuts are rougher and may have been made with a heavier stone tool or started with flint and widened with antler or stone. The two contrasting styles of work and method may be the result of different hands at different times, employing different techniques. The fine carvings are difficult to see and require low lighting to bring them out. Most of the recording was done via a wax rubbing which shows the lines clearly.



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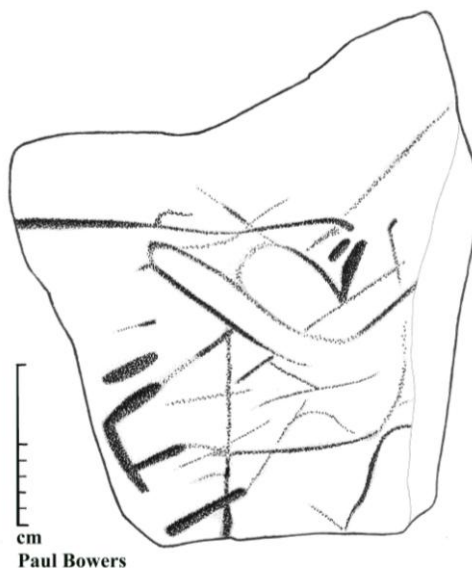
In my opinion the scratched lines that occupy the central area were the first to be applied and the other groups were applied later; the group in the upper left was carved without reference or deference to the scratched lines, whilst the lower right enclosed form seems to have incorporated these lines into the design. Without microscopic examination of the grooves it is hard to be certain and it remains speculation.

The carvings on the upper left portion of stone 1, if taken out of context (that is, ignoring the finer scratched lines in and around this group), leaves a set of grooves broader than any other on the rock. This group has a clear resemblance to rectilinear forms found within the Eastern Chamber and passage of Knowth Site 1, close to

Newgrange in Ireland. This passage and chamber contain only rectilinear forms, and the usual passage grave motifs are absent.

Stone 2 was uncovered during the second season of excavations in 2005. It was found in the same feature, but in a different pit 2.5 metres from the first. The carvings on stone 2 are quite sparse in comparison, but its markings do have something in common with the finely scratched markings of the central band of stone 1. There are similar motifs, such as incomplete rhomboids or diamonds, boxes, v-shapes or chevrons, and small cups or dots with short lines attached like drumsticks. The stone has a mixture of carvings, some deeply pecked (up to 7mm deep), some pecked and rubbed smooth and some incised. They are more open and expansive, but again show a sense of arrangement, being loosely separated into three groups across the stone, with each group distinct from the next. The method of carving is again much like that of stone 1 but with fewer fine scratches, and some of the grooves appear to have been rubbed with a blunter instrument to produce a smoother finish. Parts of the rock's surface have acquired an accretion of limestone material and this has produced a hard rough coating partly obscuring some of the carved areas and made it difficult to record some of the carvings, as well as covering other possible ones. This accretion made it impossible to do any wax rubbing, a recording method that proved fairly successful with stone 1; this could not be done with stones 2 and 3, which were recorded by eye alone and therefore may not be complete.

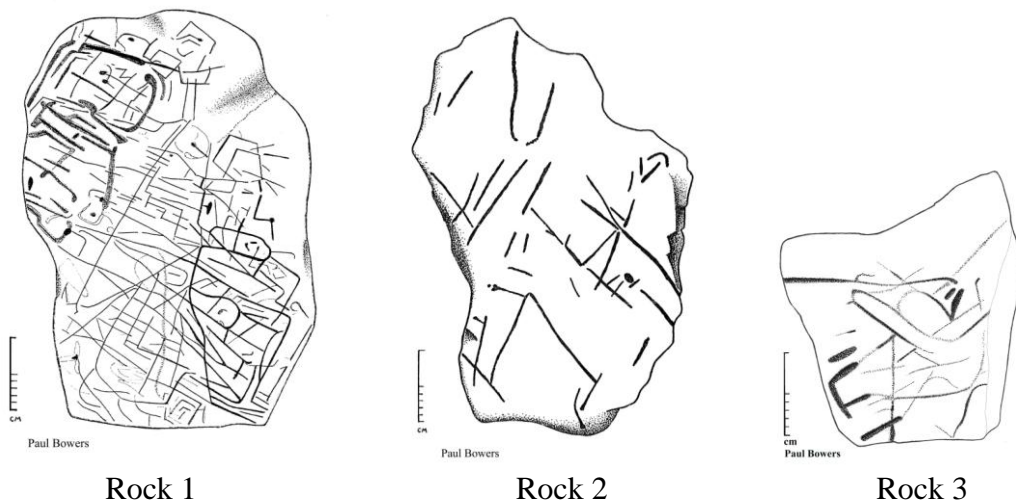
The markings on Stone 3 are like a combination in style of those on Stones 1 and 2, but closer to the latter in that they lack the complexity of Stone 1. The upper portion of the stone has been broken off in antiquity, but no carvings have been broken across. The broken face shows some weathering and iron staining attesting to a distant time span. The carved area, however, like the other two stones, is covered in limestone accretions, forming a coating like sandpaper over the carvings. This is absent from the broken face. These accretions could only have built up over a long period.



The carvings fall into the same category of both style and execution as the other two stones. Although the accretions make close examination difficult, three methods of working, including incising, rubbing or gouging and pecking seem to have been used.

The style and content of the carvings echo that of the other two stones, that is of a linear type forming triangles and angular arrangements of long and short lines. Some have a curvilinear style, with a mixture of straight and curving lines, with nearly all the markings abutting or intersecting each other. The carvings occupy more than two thirds of the surface, but lack the density of Stone 1, being nearer to the style of Stone 2. Some short, broad and deeply cut grooves arranged in a comb or broken ladder formation at one edge are not unlike the forms found on opposite edges of Stone 1. The other carvings on Stone 3 show many similarities in arrangement to Stone 2, but with the separate elements of parallel lines, open rectangles and triangles being connected together, unlike the broken disjointed arrangement of Stone 2, again more like Stone 1. The carving method again echoes Stone 1 in its mixture of broad deep grooves, rubbed or gouged lines and fine scratched lines, whereas Stone 2 has grooves all of one type.

Looking at all three stones together, the similarities are inescapable, with Stones 2 and 3 looking almost like exercises or sketches for Stone 1, or just paired down, simplified copies or impressions.



### Connections and comparisons

Although these carvings seem unique when compared to the usual repertoire of rock art such as cup and ring markings and Passage Grave art, there are parallels to be found, among Passage Graves in particular. Newgrange in Ireland has many similar motifs, as does Knowth, both in Co Meath. Others include Knocknashee, Co Sligo, Loughcrew, Co Meath, and Bauradomeeny, Co Tipperary. There are Passage Grave figures like these in France at Crec'h Quille (St Quay-Perros); Poulguen (Penmarc'h); Mane Kerioned (Carnac); Kercado (Carnac); and Petit Mont (Arzon); in Portugal at Chão Redondo II, Talhadas (Sever do Vouga); and in Spain at Granja de Toninuelo (Jerez de los Caballeros). All show linear arrangements and scratched designs clearly comparable to the Boston Spa stones. The general appearance of stone 2 brings to mind the image of the so-called 'face stone' at the Fourknocks passage grave, County Meath, Ireland, and a stone at Barclodiad-y-Gawres, another passage grave in Anglesey, North Wales.

The Ord tumulus in north-east Yorkshire produced a carved sandstone slab placed over an urn with an incised carving similar to the design found at the lower right-hand side of Boston Spa stone 1. Another barrow at Scambridge near Pickering produced a carved sandstone slab with grid lines not unlike the central area of stone 1.

Elsewhere, in a non-funereal context, there are close parallels with several stones incised at Skara Brae, the Neolithic village in the Orkney Isles. At Traprain Law in Lothian a large rock sheet on a hilltop had large areas of incised linear carvings, now destroyed. Other scratched designs are known from the chalklands of southern Britain, such as in flint mines at Grimes Graves in Norfolk, Harrow Hill in Sussex and Cissbury in Hampshire.

Chalk plaques are another form of incised linear markings. Three were found near Stonehenge at Butterfield Down and Kings Barrow, associated with pits and ritual enclosures. More chalk carvings are known from causewayed camps such as Windmill Hill, Offham, Whitehawk, the Trundle and North Marden, all in southern counties, and again found as deposits in pits and ditches.

Other linear scratched carvings have been found in Mesolithic sites and as far back as the Palaeolithic on figurines of ivory and in caves.

## **Conclusion**

The discovery of the Boston Spa stones face down in possible ritual pits draws parallels with other sites throughout the British Isles. Comparisons with carvings at domestic sites, like Skara Brae, which may also have a ritual purpose, serve to indicate that these types of carvings have a widespread distribution and may have a more personal context than the known commonly-used rock art motifs. The fact that many are hidden (those in Passage Graves are mainly found in the chamber and inner passage), deposited in barrows, flint mines etc. or buried near the tops of pits as here, suggests a ceremony of closure, or even fertility deposits requiring burial in soil. There may even be indications of some kind of magical practice at work here.

It is hard to imagine three such stones being marked like this in any random or haphazard way when they all possess a clear connectedness and spaciousness in both style and content. It is also not too much of a stretch of the imagination to see stylised imagery resembling animals, birds and fish-like forms, as well as geometric patterns not unlike imagery found in upper paleolithic cave art and Mesolithic art and, although direct dating evidence for their carving is absent, they may be part of a transitional phase of the early Neolithic before the more ordered geometric styles seen in passage grave art and later cup and ring styles took over.

The stones have clear connections with other Neolithic sites, and the fact that they do not appear to be in any burial or domestic context may add to their mystery rather than diminish their significance.

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