Introduction

Over the last two decades Stan Beckensall has worked and written extensively on the various traditions of rock art in Northern Britain. Rock Art in Northumberland is one of a series of regional studies which includes County Durham, Swaledale and Wensleydale. A volume on The Prehistoric Rock Art of Cumbria has also recently been published (Beckensall 2002). These books, along with British Prehistoric Rock Art (Beckensall 1999), are primarily gazetteers of known rock art sites based around the author's own extensive fieldwork and programme of recording. The regional approach taken by the books allows them to be used effectively as guides for exploring the wealth of rock art sites in these counties, as well as presenting a catalogue of information to a non-specialist audience. While the majority of text is taken up with the gazetteer of sites, the volume also explores themes such as patterns of distinctiveness within regions, enabling comparisons to be drawn between different areas, as well as synthesising the archaeologist's understanding of rock art sites and their place in the landscape.

The text

In the introduction to Rock Art in Northumberland, Beckensall begins by describing his own thoughts and experiences on visiting rock art sites, as well as something of the methodologies he has employed to record rock art. Those who have read British Prehistoric Rock Art (Beckensall 1999) will find some aspects of this work rather familiar, especially as many of the Northumbrian sites were included in the earlier volume. The introduction also examines where the majority of rock art is found, common styles and motifs, and how the patterns themselves were made. It includes a discussion of previous research into rock art in Northumberland since the 1820s, including the ubiquitous eccentric antiquarians and clergymen. While this may prove useful to those new to the subject, those with more than a passing interest in rock art will feel like moving swiftly into the depictions of the sites themselves where the real booty is to be found.

The gazetteer of rock art sites is divided up into three parts. The first part, Art in the landscape forms over half of the text and presents a description and illustration for all known in-situ rock art panels within the county. Grid references are given for all sites and detailed maps included for those areas which possess the most dense concentrations of rock art sites, allowing the book to be easily used as a field guide. The photographs that illustrate the book are often breathtaking and well reproduced throughout the text, while the line drawings of designs resulting from the authors own fieldwork are particularly useful in highlighting detail likely to be missed by the first time visitor.

The subsequent chapter entitled Art in monuments looks at the relationship between rock art and standing monuments, mainly focussing on standing stones and burial cairns, although examples have been recorded at henges and rock shelter sites. The last gazetteer Portable and reused stone examines all known examples of 'portable' rock art, including examples which have found their way into museum displays, field walls, clearance cairns and ornamental gardens, along with destroyed examples preserved through record.

The chapter entitled "What do we make of this?" is largely a rehash of another piece called The search for meaning that appeared in British Prehistoric Rock Art (Beckensall 1999) and does not do justice to the rest of this text. Located at
the end of the text somewhat as an afterthought the section fails to address the question it poses and is somewhat superfluous given Beckensall’s earlier statement that ‘I have long accepted that some questions will remain unanswerable’ (page 14). This summary fails to discuss contemporary rock art studies in a serious or open-minded way, for example links between rock art sites and any ceremonies involving altered state experiences are written off as simply being a product of our own ‘drug obsessed culture’ (page 182).

Conclusion

None of the comments above should, however, detract from this book as a comprehensive gazetteer of Northumberland’s impressive tradition of rock art and its usefulness as a field guide and a basis for future research. It is perhaps fair to say that the most impressive aspect of Prehistoric Rock Art in Northumberland is the rock art itself and the collection of images that have resulted from the author’s own fieldwork. It is perhaps worth highlighting the significance of Northumberland and Durham as the focus for the Rock Art Pilot Project funded by English Heritage, as a first step towards building a national database of these sites. The project will also involve local groups in the recording of rock art in the field and the creation of a methodology and database which can then be rolled out as part of a national project. At the time of writing a project officer is yet to be employed although information about the project, including how to get involved, is likely to be made available later in the year.

Bibliography


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