

Bones and Stones – The Function and Significance of Quoits in Cornwall

CAS Member Roger Farnworth wrote for “*Meyn Mamvro*”. His articles often show an emotional as well as observational response to monuments. With permission of Cheryl Straffon, editor of “*Meyn Mamvro*”, and of Cathy Farnworth I will reproduce one of his articles as a tribute to his memory in the April and October 2014 editions of the CAS Newsletter. Adrian Rodda



Quoits are the furthest we can peer back in time. Before then we’ve just got flints. Chun Quoit is much older than the first Pharaoh’s tombs, almost two millennia older than the entrance graves of the Bronze Age and it doesn’t look a day older than when it was constructed. The first builders were the best builders. Unless farmers or explosives knock them down, quoits are forever. So, what did they want to enshrine forever?

Chun Quoit: Built to last forever

Cremated bone found below quoits dates to around 3500 BCE. But the bone doesn’t date the deposition

chambers themselves. The structure of quoits indicates a specific form of burial custom: excarnation. Their common features are:

- 1) A platform over six feet long.
- 2) Support stones that raise the platform over six feet above the ground.
- 3) A substantial overhang from the edge of the platform to the support stones.
- 4) An enclosure, or chamber, formed by the support stones and capped by the platform stone.

The evidence for excarnation is that these four features are required. A body placed on open ground would be dismembered by carnivores such as foxes. It would be an horrific outcome if one’s kin were polluted through consumption by vermin. However, if a body were to be placed on the quoit then it could not be reached by foxes or rodents because of the overhang, and the height would prevent access by leaping. The corpse could be left unattended whilst scavenger birds such as kites rapidly stripped the skeleton. Bones freed from corruption, by now less attractive to carnivores, could then be placed in the chamber below, perhaps after its defences against scavengers had been strengthened by placing wooden stakes in any gaps. (These bones have entirely dissolved in the acid rain and soil, leaving only much



Zennor Quoit. Photo FPR.

later cremated bone which has been calcined by the heat.) Not only is transience and corruption removed by excarnation but also all individuality disappears. What is left is the essence of the group from

which each member was derived and would also return to bone. They would be as everlasting as the quoit. But as Cheryl Straffon wrote in *Ancient sites in West Penwith*, "It would be a mistake to think of these monuments simply as 'burial chambers'. Disarticulated bones of a number of individuals may have been placed inside and from time to time were removed and replaced by others. We may rather think of these sites as places where the tribe would go to consult with the spirits of their dead ancestors."

These people were peripatetic; the first permanent hut circles were built two millennia later. The quoits could be seen over great distances as they were usually on high ground. On their wanderings around the Penwith island they could focus on the container of their tribal essence. Their ritual would be to approach that crucible, maybe handle the bones and to consider their source and their destiny. Our own ritual can be to view the man-made harmonies of Zennor Quoit, the balance of its lines, and the distribution of its mass. In spite of its damage, we can gaze on this beauty, share it, and hear the same statement.

Trethevy Quoit

Trethevy Quoit is precisely due south of Stowe's Pound whose peak would be just visible from the quoit were it not for a modern intervening hedge. Before the hedge was constructed, the Pole Star would have been seen directly above Stowe's Pound peak, and the whole cosmos would have been seen to revolve above the peak. This would have been immensely significant to the observers and this is reflected in the design of Trethevy Quoit.



Trethevey is a perfect portal dolmen. Two massive pillars form the entrance portal. The chamber is a closed box with a small entry hole. The capstone on which corpses would have lain for excarnation slopes northward towards Stowe's Pound.

The long south portal stone of the quoit is slope-adjusted by a large wedging stone. If at night one leans on the portal stone and looks up, the Pole Star, and only this star, will be framed in the capstone's small circular hole. When looking at the wedge shaped cut in the east portal stone from the same position, you will be looking due north towards the peak of Stowe's Pound. A kilometre distant a double row of large, carefully placed boulders (SX258 699) leads the eye up to the edge of the Moor directly to where Stowe's Pound peak lies.



Why are there no Quoits on Bodmin Moor?

If quoits were, as I have argued, built for excarnation, the question arises – why were no quoits built on Bodmin Moor? Trethevey Quoit was built just south of the Moor. It would have been known to the Neolithic inhabitants of Bodmin Moor itself and thus could have been imitated - yet people chose not to build their own quoits on the moor. The reason is simple: if



Cheesewring at Stowe's Pound

quoit platforms were indeed used for excarnation there was no need to build quoits on Bodmin Moor. Several suitable platforms for excarnation, such as Carn Galva and the Cheesewring, already exist on the moor in the shape of natural stacks of granite slabs. These natural structures, absent from Penwith Moors, would have been perfect for deterring foxes, allowing excarnation by hawks and kites. So where were the chambers for depositing the bones? Immediately below the most suitable stack on the peak of Stowe's Pound is a natural cave of several square meters capacity. At the foot of the immense Cheesewring

called High Rock on Kilmar Tor there is a partially constructed cave; here the clean, dry bones could have been stored when they blew off the high platform or were removed. There is also a suitable enclosure beneath the highest platform stack at Hawk's Tor at North Hill. There are several constructed chambers beneath rock stacks elsewhere whose topmost slabs overhang.

To sum up: the puzzling distribution of quoits is explained by my theory. There are no cheesewrings in those parts of West Penwith where there are quoits and no quoits in those parts where there are suitable excarnation platforms.

When we look at Trethevey Quoit, we realise the collective strength of a community was required to lift this monument into place. We also know the greater gravity of their essential need to make sense of death and the significance of life. When confronted with these sites our imagination reaches back to give voice to those about whom so little is known. We know them through the power of their imaginative achievements in conjunction with our own imagination.

Roger Farnworth

(lightly edited by Cathy Farnworth)