

Fermanagh

a story in **100** objects



Reyfad Rock Art

by **Christiaan Corlett**

Rock art is the name applied by archaeologists to a particular form of prehistoric art found in northern and Atlantic Europe. In Ireland it is found in large concentrations along some coastal areas such as the Dingle and Iveragh peninsulas of Kerry, the Inishowen peninsula of Donegal, as well as parts of Cork. In Leinster rock art is primarily found in Carlow, Kildare, Louth, Meath and Wicklow. Rock art is also found in smaller but growing numbers in southwest Ulster, including several examples in Fermanagh. By far the most impressive example of Fermanagh rock art can be found at Reyfad, Boho. The site consists of six outcrops of limestone, all in their original position. Five of the stones are decorated, but it seems likely that the sixth was formerly decorated also, but that the carvings have been lost over the millennia. Four of the stones are relatively small and feature a series of cup marks, some enclosed by one or more rings. Cup and rings, and unenclosed cup marks are the most common motif found in Irish and British rock art.

The fifth decorated stone at Reyfad is the largest and measures over 3m long and over 2m across. The marks of wooden wedges that were used by stone cutters sometime in antiquity thankfully indicate an abortive attempt to split this stone, which would have deprived us of one of the finest examples of rock art anywhere in Ireland. The entire surface of this massive stone is covered with cup and ring motifs, and is arguably the densest composition of Irish rock art. Like the stones nearby, the surface of this outcrop is very uneven, and also slopes to one side. This did not deter our Neolithic sculptors, who may even have taken advantage of naturally occurring solution hollows in the rock surface to create some of the cup marks. One of the cup marks is enclosed by four rings, and in

several instances the cup and rings are conjoined. There are also a number of small crosses that appear to form part of the original composition.



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Excavations by the late Blaze O'Connor at Deerpark, Co. Monaghan illustrate that Irish rock art belongs to the Neolithic period, and probably predates the art found at Neolithic passage tombs such as at Kiltierney on the eastern side of Lower Lough Erne. Indeed, rock art is fundamentally different to the art found in passage tombs, which is always found on the structural stones of the tombs, and was probably never intended to be publicly accessible. Rock art, on the other hand, is always found on natural outcrops of rock in the open air for everyone to see. While rock art may have been Ireland's earliest form of public art, it is most likely that it had a religious function.

So what purpose did the Reyfad rock art serve? Perhaps the setting of this stone provides a clue, for it commands a truly spectacular view over the Lower Erne basin. In 1911 George Coffey, Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, suggested that the rock art at Reyfad was deliberately placed here to take full advantage of this natural amphitheatre that opens to the east and the rising sun, and that the cup and rings on the stones were votive sun offerings. It is true that the Reyfad rock art faces the direction of

the rising sun, but this does not explain the decoration itself or why it was applied on to these particular stones.

What is so impressive about the rock art at Reyfad is the density of the carvings. However, in reality there are only a small number of motifs; unenclosed cup marks, cup and rings, and cup encircled by two or more rings. It seems quite likely that these motifs had one than more symbolism and could have been used to convey a number of meanings. The complexity of the composition at Reyfad reflects just how unlikely it is that we can ever come close to understanding the specific meaning of the art. Even the meaning of an overall composition may only have been understood by the person or people responsible for it. Certainly the density of the decoration at Reyfad implies that more than one person was responsible for carving it. Perhaps the symbols represent a complex message of family history or a personal spiritual journey associated with an initiation ceremony or passage of rights, or perhaps they simply served to delineate family, tribal or sacred boundaries. It seems most likely that any given example of rock art may have represented a combination of these.



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One of the most fascinating aspects of rock art is that it is arguably the most environmentally friendly ways of altering the landscape without making any physical

alterations to it. Unlike the concept of creating an entirely man made monument such as the Kiltierney passage tomb, our Neolithic ancestors chose existing rock surfaces in the Fermanagh landscape for their canvas. In this way they completely changed the meaning of the natural landscape without actually changing anything. Rather than being conspicuous, like a megalithic tomb, rock art is inconspicuous. By selecting existing rock surfaces in the landscape the application of rock art actually cleverly avoided making any direct changes to the landscape. In this way rock art was a simple and environmentally friendly way of altering or framing the landscape in a permanent format by placing artificial and permanent markings on the landscape itself, while at the same time making the least amount of physical alteration to that landscape.

Arguably, the oldest art form in Ireland has more in common with some modern art, in particular urban graffiti, than it has with the art of intervening millennia. In the case of modern graffiti, the urban landscape is the canvas, while in prehistoric rock art the open rural landscape was the canvas. Yet, unlike modern urban graffiti, which tends to be brash and obvious, rock art is subtle and inconspicuous. Indeed, rock art is practically invisible and requires intensive prospecting in order to be found. This must also have been true in the Neolithic, and therefore must be of significance in terms of its function. At face value, rock art on a stone in a field may seem to be primitive, simplistic and archaic. A closer examination of our oldest art form reveals that it is sophisticated, complex and arguably very modern.

There can be little doubt that more examples of rock art will be found in Fermanagh to compliment the recent research in neighbouring parts of Cavan that have shown that rock art is much more widespread in southwest Ulster than was previously thought. From previous experience in other parts of Ireland, one of the potential places for rock art to turn up in Fermanagh are in the drystone walls that enclose the many fields. The marks of the stone cutters on the main panel of rock art at Reyfad may show just how close this stone came to being broken up and used as building material for the nearby stone walls. How many examples of rock art were not so lucky?



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'Fermanagh: a story in one hundred objects' is a project involving people from the local community, historians and students from the University of Ulster.

Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, this project is part of our 'Fermanagh Heritage Gateway' activity programme. The research project tells aspects of Fermanagh's diverse history through the selection and interpretation of one hundred key objects. Objects are locally important as well as of wider international significance.

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