

# Transcending ARTISTIC ritual boundaries, from dolmen to menhir:

## The excavation of the Trefael Stone, South-west Wales

### Introduction

The multiple cupmarked Trefael Stone, standing within an enclosed drystone and turfed walled field c. 1.7km east of the medieval settlement of Nevern is one of a number of visible later prehistoric sites within the area (Figure 1). As far as the authors are aware no previous archaeological investigations have been undertaken at this monument. However, the stone has in the past formed part of an

extensive survey of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments within South-west Wales (Barker 1992) and has also received limited attention by Lynch (1972), Children and Nash (1997) & Nash (2006). Frances Lynch along with Children & Nash has postulated that the standing stone may have once belonged to a much larger and more complex monument, possibly a Neolithic burial-ritual monument.

Figure 1. Location of the Trefael Stone and associated Later Prehistoric burial-ritual monuments within the Afon Nevern catchment



The Trefael Stone is located on land belonging to Coedfryn Farm and was first recorded by W.F. Grimes (1929, 31 & 277). However, based on the historic map evidence this stone was also known during the late 19th century. Until recently and recorded on the upper surface of this stone were up to 45 shallow cupmarks, each with a mean diameter of c. 5cm (the largest being c. 10 cm in diameter). Following the 2010 excavation by the authors this number had been increased to 75 cupmarks of varying quality and size (see Figures 2 and 5).

Based on a geophysical survey and excavation programme undertaken during the latter half of 2010 the authors can now confirm that the Trefael Stone is probably a former capstone that once covered a small burial chamber, probably a Portal Dolmen, Wales' earliest Neolithic burial-ritual monument types. The Trefael stone currently stands within a flat area of ground and therefore any surviving



Figure 2. The fully excavated Trefael Stone, exposing 75+ cupmarks

earthworks associated with a burial monument appears to have long since gone, probably the result of extensive field clearance during historical times. In its recent history the stone has been a focus for cattle and sheep and as a result a shallow depression immediately around the northern end of the monument has appeared.

Despite this disturbance and damage to the north-eastern side of the stone, the site has been designated a Schedule Monument (Ref: PEM 313) and therefore, prior to any potential excavation, Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) for Welsh heritage agency Cadw was required.

### Site history and context

The Trefael monument, located 2.1 km SE of the Pembrokeshire coastline, stands 125m AOD and is within an extensive area of Palaeozoic sedimentary slate, mudstone and siltstone derivatives much of which is covered by a glacial till and related soil derivatives (soil-type referred to as a MANOD 611c – *Silsoe 1983*).

Elements of the solid geology are incorporated into the surrounding buried cairn, whilst the stone is made from silicified sandstone.

According to Lynch (1972, 79), this now tilted stone may have once formed the capstone to a chambered burial-ritual monument and is probably one of up to six Neolithic burial-ritual sites that form a significant cluster around the Nevern Valley. (see fig. 1). Of the six monuments around the Nevern Valley, two sites have clear cupmarks present. Approximately 2.7 km to the north is the double chambered dolmen of Trelyffaint (PEM 2) which has carved on one of its capstones over 30 faint eroded cupmarks, whilst 4.4 km to the west of Trefael and within the town of Newport is Carreg Coatan (PEM 3) which has a single cupmark on one of its uprights.

The Trefael Stone in the recent past appears to have been severely damaged on the right hand side, probably the result of ploughing or impact with farm machinery. A large stone flake measuring around 0.40 x 0.35m has been sheered and may have contained further cupmarks. Unfortunately, the 2010 excavation did not expose the missing flake or fragments belonging to it. One can only assume that it was removed and placed next to or within the field boundary.

Based on late 19th century cartographic evidence the Trefael Stone is marked as a 'stone'. There appears to have been little change in size and shape to the field in which it stands, however, absent is a gated access to the field immediately south (connecting this field with Field No. 176). Within the neighbouring field to the south is marked another stone, probably a standing stone of prehistoric date. This single stone appears to have stood until the publication of the Ordnance Survey map of 1907 and was more than probably removed and placed within a nearby field boundary.

### Fieldwork methods

The fieldwork programme was divided into two phases: a non-intrusive preliminary programme of work that included a geophysical survey of the site and its immediate sur-



Figures 3a & 3b. One of two beads and detail of microwear forming around the perforation.

roundings, undertaken in September 2010, followed by excavation (and post-excavation assessment). The geophysical survey element applied both magnetometry (fluxgate gradiometer) and resistivity methods within a 10m square grid around the Trefael monument. The results of geophysical survey showed that a symmetrical kidney-shaped anomaly existed around the stone with an in-turned space at the eastern end of the monument; the anomaly measured c. 8m (north-south) by 6.5m (east-west).

Based on the results of the geophysical survey, various areas were targeted for potential excavation and as a result a 4m x 4m trench was excavated immediately south-east of the stone where a strong-signalled anomaly in the form of in situ cairn was identified (see fig. 4).

### The excavation

The excavation was organised into two phases. Phase 1 included the 4m x 4m trench with additional slots/test pits added in order to gauge the stratigraphy and depth of the archaeology and undisturbed natural deposits. Up to four archaeological contexts or layers were identified including a probable Neolithic surface and underlying natural deposition.

Despite the clear prehistoric horizon, finds were limited and included several sherds of medieval pottery from within the upper stra-

tigraphy of the site and two perforated shale/mudstone beads which are similar to those found at the Early Mesolithic coastal settlement site for Nab Head where over 690 similar slate beads were discovered (David & Walker, 2004; Nash *forthcoming*). Each bead, measuring c. 4.5cm in diameter and water-worn appear to have been imported from somewhere along the Pembrokeshire coast where substantial exposures of sea-worn Palaeozoic mudstones and shales are in abundance. Microwear analysis appears to show that each bead was perforated as a result of human agency (Figures 3a & 3b).

Within the excavation trench, several slots were excavated, one abutting the capstone and another located within the south-west corner of the trench. The two slots, one located within the SE corner of the trench (Test Pit 1) and the other immediately east of the Trefael Stone (Test Pit 2) were excavated. The rationale for Test Pit 1 was to expose the Neolithic land surface and any deposits/features and structures that might survive within this deposition. Recorded within the SW section of the slot abutting the capstone, in a clear *in situ* cairn deposit was a clear vertical cut which suggested that the stone may have been erected upright as an ornate standing stone following its use and subsequent abandonment as a capstone that originally belonged to a Portal Dolmen.



Figure 4. Aerial Cam Image showing the final exposed contexts during planning

Extending across the main trench was the current ground surface/deposit which was interpreted as a cultivation soil. This loosely-compacted dark brown clay-rich soil contained small angular and sub-angular stones, many originating from the cairn (Figure 4). Also recorded from this context were 322 pieces of white quartz concentrated around the southern part of the standing stone. The high quantity of quartz may represent an archaeological feature that has been possibly subjected to plough damage, representing a pavement within the area of the façade/entrance. The use of quartz as a possible ritualized surface has been recorded within the façade area belonging to the passage graves of Knowth and Newgrange, both in the Boyne Valley, Ireland (O’Kelly 1982; Eogan, 1986). At Trefael and other monuments of this period, colour and texture would have played an important role during the ritual processes associated within the faced area (Cooney, 2000).

Underlying the cultivation soil was in places, a tightly-compacted sub-angular and sub-

rounded stone deposit (accounting for >80% of the context) that was within a well-compacted dark yellowish brown clay-rich soil. This deposit, interpreted as part of an *in situ* cairn also contained occasional slate fragments and moderate quantities of white quartz. Cultural artefacts were rare, however, recovered from around the base of the Trefael Stone was a lead green glazed neck-section belonging to a medieval flagon vessel. Its presence may be the result of moderate bioturbation around this area of the site.

Located away from areas with a high concentration of stone (i.e. cairn material) was a loosely to moderately compacted brown soil with small sub-angular stones and occasional charcoal flecking; this deposit was interpreted as an historic cultivation deposit. Contained within the soil matrix were concentrations of pea gravel and rounded pebbles, interpreted as the outer remnants of the cairn.

Underlying this historic deposit and forming the floor of the *in situ* cairn was a loosely-

compacted dark yellowish brown clayey soil with occasional small angular stones and thin mudstone fragments; with evidence of limited bioturbation. Dispersed throughout this probable Neolithic soil was occasional charcoal flecking, unfortunately too small for chronometric dating.

## Discussion

The geophysical survey and the subsequent excavation revealed significant results including a tightly-compacted rubble cairn deposit on the southern side of the Trefael stone. The exposure of the cairn mirrored the anomaly present within the results of the geophysical survey.

The archaeology contained within the two slots, one within the south-eastern corner of the trench and the other immediately adjacent to the stone revealed anthropogenic activity followed by natural deposition. Below the cairn deposit was the probable Neolithic land surface, although no finds or dating evidence from this deposit have confirmed this. However, the cairn deposit did overlie this deposit/surface.

The excavation of Test pit 2 revealed the lower section of the Trefael Stone. Gouged onto this surface were c. 75 weathered cupmarks - arranged in no recognised pattern, although a number of informative suggestions have been made (Figure 5). Also present were several grooved lines which are probably the result of recent plough damage and missing on the right side of the surface is a large section of stone, the result of probable plough shear damage; it is more than probable that further cupmarks existed on the missing section of the stone.

Single and multiple cupmarked stones are relatively common throughout Western Britain and are usually associated with Neolithic/Bronze Age ritual-burial activity. In terms of the relationship between cupmarks and chambered burial-ritual monuments, the preferred location is usually the upper surface of the capstone such as nearby Trelyfiant (Pembrokeshire); Mean Cattwg (Glamorgan) and Bachwan (Llyn Peninsula) and it is more than

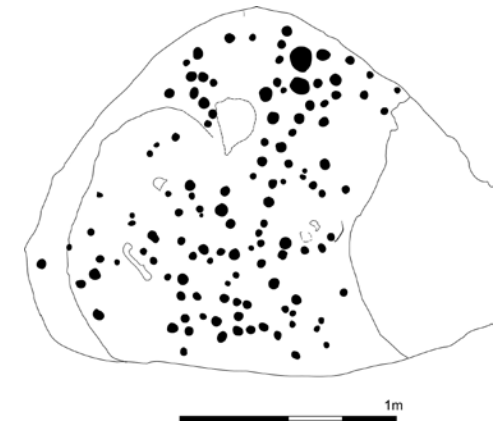


Figure 5. Distribution of varying sized cupmarks on the south face of the stone (drawn by Carol James & George Nash)

probable that the Trefael Stone formed an identical function.

The rock-art recorded below the current ground level was limited to a few cupmarks. However the size and shape of the stone was ascertained, measuring c. 2 x 2.3m. In addition, the southern and western sections within Test Pit 2 revealed a tightly-compacted cairn deposit, measuring c. 0.40m in thickness and extending across most of the south-eastern section of the site; basically mirroring the results of the geophysical survey. Within the western section was a clear vertical cut through the lower section of the cairn deposit and the Neolithic land-surface on which the monument stood. The cut may represent a secondary use of the monument, when during the Bronze Age the capstone of the former Portal Dolmen was up-ended and utilised as a standing stone, possibly representing one of a number of landscape markers within the vicinity. Approximately 2.5 km east of the Trefael Stone is a complex of barrows/cairns, known as Crugiau Cemmaes (NGR SN 126 416). This complex stands on a small promontory around 196 m AOD. It is conceivable that an association may have existed between the Trefael Stone as a monument marker and this Bronze Age burial-ritual complex.

Recovered from Test Pit 2 were two perforated slate/mudstone beads, each measuring c. 4.5cm in diameter. The provenance of the

Trefael beads is intriguing in that the beads from the Nab Head site are arguably dated to the 9th millennium BCE and the Trefael site is Neolithic, a period of time between the two sites of around 5,000 years. Tolan-Smith (2008, 146) does however express though some caution with the limited dating material of the Nab Head site and therefore the Nab Head beads may be recent and it could be the case that the idea and meaning of adornment through perforating and wearing stone and shell beads extends into the Early Neolithic. However, based on the provenance of stone and shell beads from other sites in Western Britain, the concept of manufacturing and using such items is a clear Mesolithic trait (Jacobi 1980; David & Walker 2004). One cannot dismiss the idea that the two beads originate from a much earlier phase of the Trefael monument when the place may have been used by hunter/fisher/gatherers during the Mesolithic. The early use of Neolithic burial-ritual sites is not uncommon in Western Britain, for example the ritual-burial monuments of Arthurs Stone (Herefordshire) and Gwernvale (Breconshire) which contain histories that extend as far back as the Late Upper Palaeolithic period; a period between Neolithic monument and Late Palaeolithic *place* of around 6000 years (Britnell 1984); one can probably postulate a similar scenario for Trefael.

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