Excavation and consolidation of a cup and ring marked boulder near Helensburgh

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Abstract
A limited excavation around a prominent cup and ring marked boulder produced no archaeological evidence relevant to it. An inverted part of the boulder which had been broken off by explosion was returned to its former juxtaposed position among the shattered remains; no rock art was visible on its previously unseen surfaces. A second revised survey of the stone was completed in light of further rock art being revealed under favourable lighting conditions.

Introduction

This report should be read in conjunction with an earlier report by Sandra Kelly (Kelly 2015) who deals with the survey of the prominent cup and ring boulder located at NS 29599 84566, and lying between the Glennan Burn and a public path through Drumfad Wood on the hill of Tom na h-Airidh, to the north west of the town of Helensburgh (Pl 1). The stone is given on OS maps (Fig 1) and on Canmore.

The survey was done in response to local concerns that the rock art on the stone was being eroded, and it showed that indeed much of what was recorded in 1924 (Lacaille 1924) Fig 2, was no longer visible. The idea to further investigate the stone was put to North Clyde Archaeological Society who embraced the rationale (below) and included it as part of their fieldwork programme.

Fig 1. Public footpath from Hillhouse car park

Pl 1. The stone before excavation.

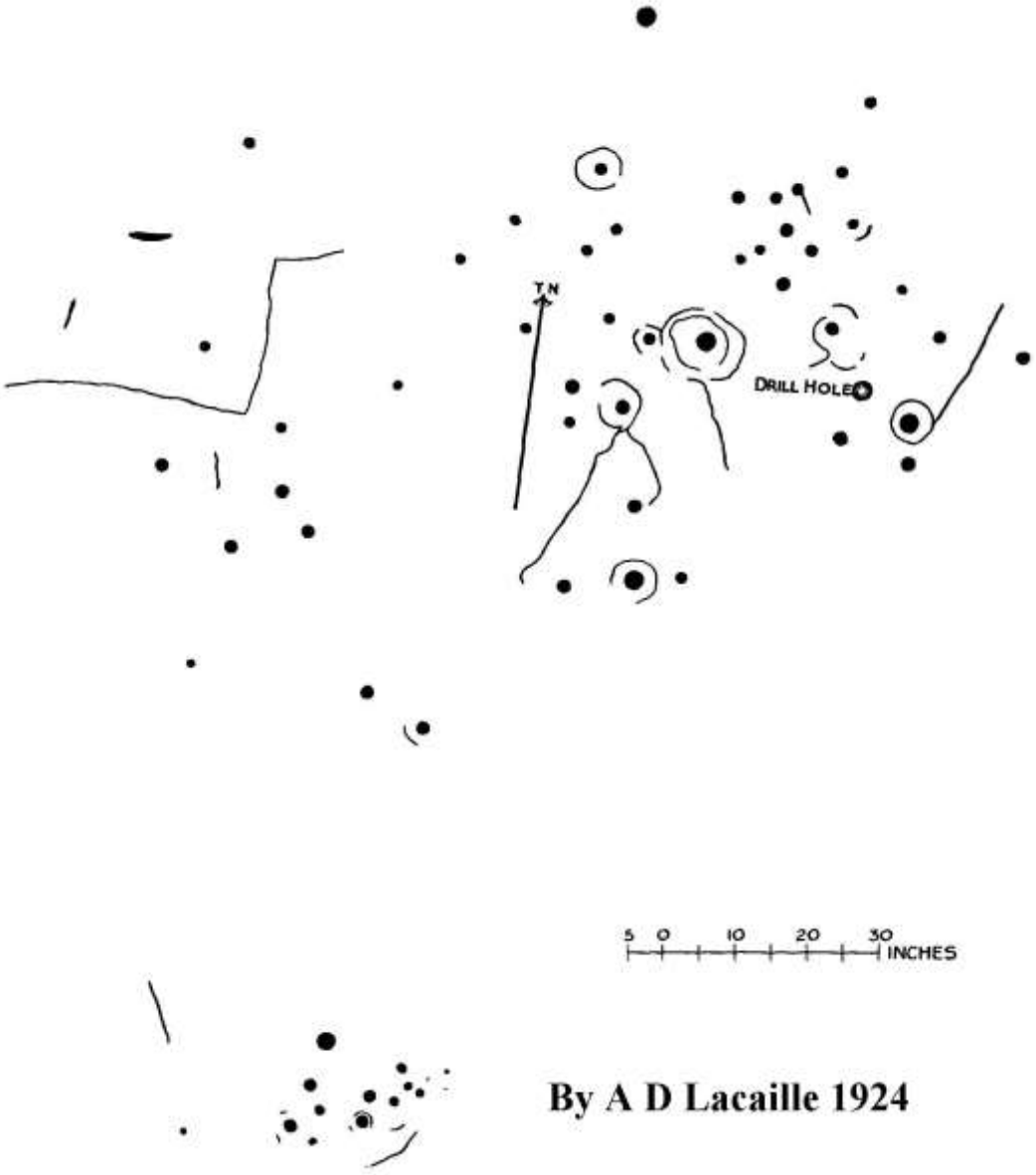

Fig 2. Survey by Lacaille.

Rationale and methodology

The project had three principal aims, all of which were achieved;

1 To determine if any archaeological evidence survived beside the boulder.

2 To determine if any further rock art existed on the unseen faces of the inverted part of the boulder.

3 To provide training and experience in field archaeology for members of the North Clyde Archaeological Society.

The following plan of the stone differs from the earlier one by NCAS (Kelly op cit) as yet further carving was revealed under more favourable lighting conditions.

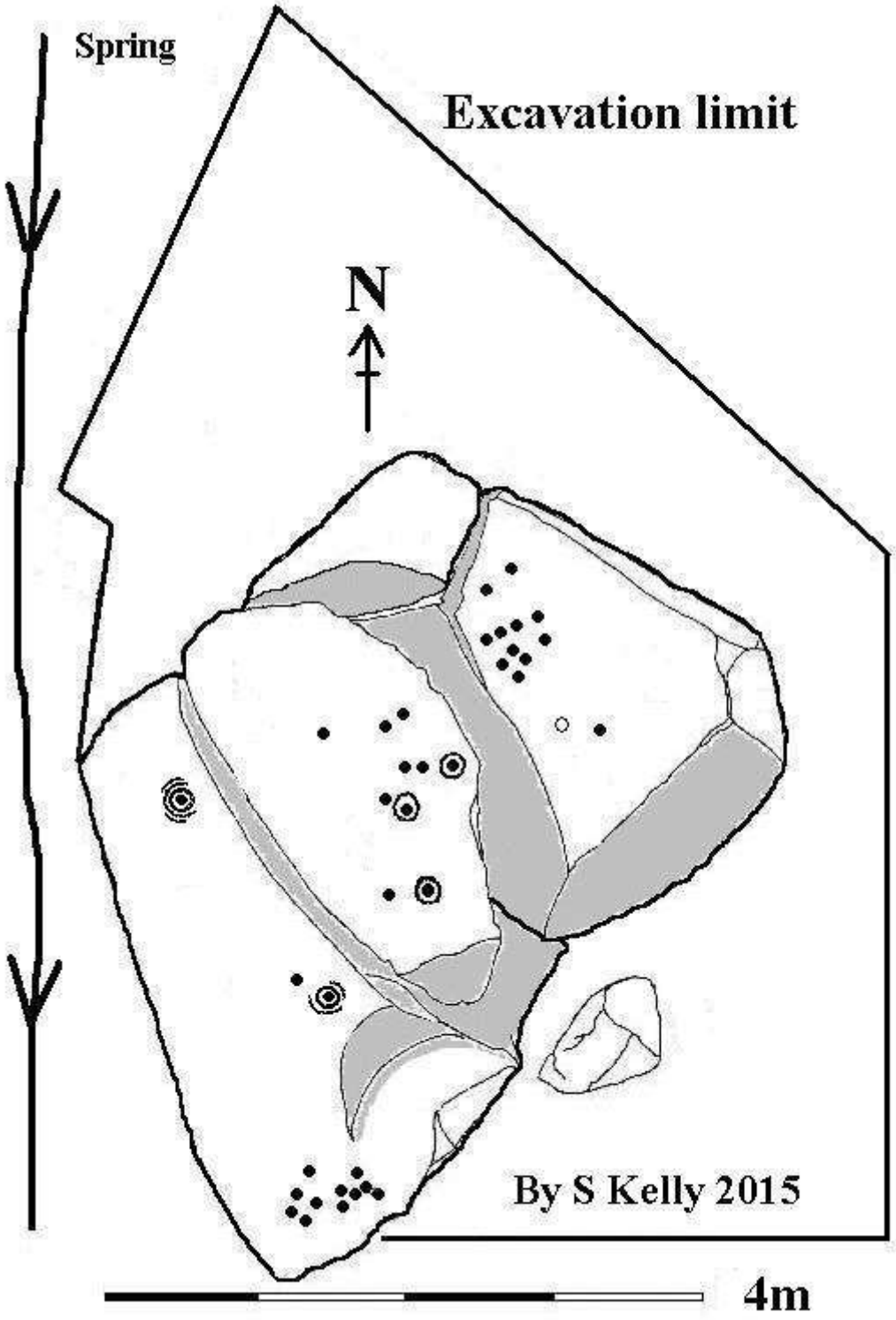

Fig 3. New survey and excavation plan.

The excavation (Fig 3) around the boulder was done by hand tools, turf and vegetation were removed and after first cleaning, the area was trowelled down into the natural till which was composed of an orange to cream coloured sandy/clay intermixed with stones up to cobble size. The only features which were found were two modern fire

sites (F1 and F2) (Pl's 2&3), each with plastic and silver paper lying below and within the charcoal spreads, no finds were located other than modern rubbish. Random sondage were then cut through the till to prove that hill wash did not cover any parts of the site burying archaeological deposits, in the event it was shown that the ground was entirely composed of natural till.

A large slab of stone (Pl's 4, 6-8) measuring 1.6m by 0.7m by 0.2m thick was found lying prostrate and below the inverted part of the main boulder. It was uplifted and the ground below it was also excavated but with negative result. This boulder was replaced in its former position and used with other boulders to support the repositioned inverted boulder.

The inverted part of the main stone was moved to the side of the trench and turned over for inspection after which it was repositioned in juxtaposition to the remaining fragments of the main boulder. Scaffolding poles and wooden battens were used for this part of the operation and at no time did the metal poles or other stones come into contact with the two large stones which were moved, wooden battens were used throughout as interface between the moved stones and levers etc, consequentially the original cup marked boulder and fragment was neither chipped nor scraped, no mean feat considering the size of the stones and that the team involved had never carried out such work before.

The repositioned fragment was aligned with the two accompanying parts but since all the fragments were blown apart by the explosion; gaps between them all remain (Fig 3, Pl's 8-12).

Finally the excavation was landscaped with the original turf and spoil but with all bracken and rush plants being excluded, also all modern rubbish such as broken glass were removed from the site.

Plate 2. Showing charcoal F1.

Plate 3. Showing charcoal F1.

Plate 4. Showing inverted stone over slab.

Plate 5. Moving inverted stone.

The excavation

An irregular shaped trench was opened around the east and north sides of the main boulder, a tributary of the Glennan Burn flows directly over bedrock on the other sides. In total the trench measured up to circa 16 square metres, the ground sloping irregularly down from north to south. The main boulder (a glacial erratic) could be seen to lying directly over the till indicating that it had been deposited from the glacier after the till formation.

For the most part the till did not contain rock above cobble size and it was evident in the adjacent spring that the underlying bedrock was not far from the ground surface.

The excavation extended as far as possible below the main rock but no finds or features were encountered other than modern rubbish which was removed from the site, however a single fragment of the original stone (Pl 13) and showing part of the fractured drill hole was recovered, it was left on site between the boulder fragments.

Stone repositioning

Part of the project outcome was to determine the true extent of rock art since the inverted northern part of the boulder had lain upside down since *before* the study of the site made by Lacaille (op cit) in 1924. The stone was therefore levered out (Pl 5) and turned over to examine the former upper surface, however; apart from an unconvincing possible single cup nothing was noted. The stone was replaced in a juxtaposed position relevant to the other parts 3 (Fig 3, Pl's 9-12) but nevertheless not exactly adjacent them as all the fragments were separated by varying sized gaps during the explosion which disintegrated the boulder. All the major surviving parts can however be better appreciated as they are now found (Pl's 9 & 11).

Plate 6. With inverted stone moved back, exposing slab below

Plate 7. Slab lifted and ground below excavated

Plate 8. Part of the team.

Plate 9. Inverted stone refitted

Plate 10. Inverted stone refitted.

Plate 11. Entire boulder with refitted stone

	
Plate 12. Job done, part of the team	**Plate 13. Fragment of drill hole.**

Discussion and conclusion

All of the aims and objectives set out for this project were achieved, however disappointing were the results regarding further rock art and any associated evidence. Nevertheless the project lays to rest any speculation regarding such evidence although it must be said that the limited excavation around the boulder does not imply that such archaeological evidence is not to be found in the immediate vicinity and which has not been investigated. Certainly it appears that any activities involving tools, fires, sub surface features, if they ever existed, have left no trace in the excavated area.

The comparison between the Lacaille survey (Fig 2) and the most recent one (S Kelly, Fig 3) shows both similarities and differences; Lacaille recorded fifty eight cups in total with five showing a hint of a ring and another five with rings. The Kelly survey shows only thirty six cups in total, with three surrounded by single rings, one with a double ring and one with a triple ring.

It will be seen that the grouping of cups on the southern point of the rock compare well in both surveys, this is because that part of the rock cannot be stood upon so easily as the other areas, thus the preservation here has been better. The cup with two rings on the Kelly survey is seen on Lacaille but with only a hint of a ring, however the neighbouring cup beside it is given by both. The single cup with the triple rings (Kelly) is given by Lacaille as a grouping but with no rings. The three cup and single rings by Kelly are easily seen on Lacaille's drawing, but it is evident that several cups recorded in 1924 are now definitely absent.

Natural weathering may account for some of the erosion of the surface of the boulder but it is more likely that much of the missing rock art is attributable to people climbing on the stone and wearing the surface with their feet.

Only under the most favourable lighting conditions can all of the rock art be seen.

This report does not explore the reasons for such rock art as it is rehearsed in numerous publications, suffice to say that cup and ring markings and indeed many other types of pre-historic rock art are still poorly understood regarding their meaning and significance, this project hoped to achieve some new evidence to assist with that problem.

The Society has installed an interpretation panel on site (Pl 14).

Pl 14. Display panel installed on site.

Acknowledgement
The Society is indebted to Luss Estates for kind permission to engage with this project and also for permission to install the interpretation panel.

Luss Estates and Foundation Scotland funded the cost of the panel which was installed by NCAS volunteers.

The following members of the Society took part in the excavation and consolidation of the site; Tam Ward conceived the project and directed it, Carole Biggam, Sharon Creasy, Anne Evans, Alasdair Jamieson, Sandra Kelly, Nick Maidment, Alastair McIntyre, Moira Murning, Katherine Pryce, Norman Rodgers, Suzanne Wardle and Jeremy Watson. Further assistance was given by Pete Ashton and Alison Hatrick of the Access Trust, and Ufo Sutter.

References

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Ordnance Survey Sheet 347 Explorer Map, Loch Lomond South, Scale 1:25,000.