

## Conference Workshop, Saturday 24 April 2021

### Panel Discussion: A Future for Scotland's Rock Art?

#### Summary

##### Participants:

**Dr Tertia Barnett (Chair):** Principal Investigator for Scotland's Rock Art Project

**Dr John Raven (HES):** Deputy Head of Ancient Monuments in HES and lead for carved stones including rock art

**Susan Hamilton (HES):** Member of the Data Management Team in HES which has responsibility for the Canmore site

**Dr Sally Foster (University of Stirling):** Senior Lecturer, Heritage and Conservation, University of Stirling. Principal Investigator and co-author of *Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland: A Research Framework*; former Chair of the National Committee on Carved Stones in Scotland

**Dr Kenny Brophy (University of Glasgow):** Head of Archaeology Department, University of Glasgow, working with community groups on rock art sites and interested in urban prehistoric sites and using prehistory to improved people's lives.

**Alan Thompson (NOSAS):** Lead of NOSAS (North of Scotland Archaeological Society) community rock art team for last four years

**Dr Stuart Jeffrey (Glasgow School of Art):** School of Simulation and Visualisation, working with community groups on digital heritage and co-investigator on ScRAP.

**Question 1: What have we learnt about community co-production from ScRAP and relevant projects such as ACCORD and Faifley Rocks? How can we build on this to foster future community engagement with rock art and, potentially, with the wider historic environment?**

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- Community is in essence local and personal, and an enhanced understanding of how these perspectives fit with those attaching to a national project is needed to better run projects in the future.
- Different values inform people's motivations and it is important to understand the different value sets at local and national level and how they can be brought together.

- Participation by community groups is motivated more by social reasons than by an interest in rock art, as seen during the project where participation was been greater and more enthusiastic when training in large groups with a number of known panels than in remote sites.
- We need to look at barriers to participation such as background, education and jargon-filled websites. As well as local groups, there are communities of interest which may be spread across the country, and people who we have not reached out to.
- In co-production targets are not set by the community of interest (for example, ScRAP focus on rock art), whereas in co-design engagement with communities uncovers what they define as their heritage. Instead of academic or heritage authorities being funders with agendas around which communities are mobilised, could they be servants of those communities?
- Methodology is driven by aims. For ScRAP local groups were set up to work on rock art, unlike Faifley where the community was pre-existing.
- In Faifley people had a shared interest in and knowledge of their local area. ScRAP brought expertise on the recording process, and local people brought local knowledge about sites. It was a knowledge-sharing exercise. Communities may be principally interested in their local area, and rock art can be attached to, and facilitate, that interest.
- Rock art could be mainstreamed into other contemporary agendas, such as inclusion and well-being, where the rock art itself is not necessarily the driver.
- To get people involved, the research subject needs not to be too narrow. In the case of NOSAS, there was an earlier unfinished rock art project which people were interested in completing, both for local knowledge and to contribute to national aims. However, the local and national balance is not always easy to reach.
- It comes back to the story you want to tell. ScRAP is focussed, academic, and mostly aimed at understanding rock art in the prehistoric past.
- ScRAP's main aim is to look at significance and value in the past, but my role is to examine contemporary social value, both around the stones themselves and around engagement. The question of why people become involved in these projects is an important one which we tend to consider less, although it is becoming mainstreamed.
- Along with contemporary social value, we also taking the biographical approach to objects and places, looking at what we understand about the Neolithic and the Bronze Age and what we understand now. However, there are millennia in between which need to be joined, along with local knowledge.
- Along with the archaeology of sites, we also need to consider the myths, names, memories and local folklore attached to them. These stories can be teased out from local people and have just as much value as what happened 5,000 years ago.
- What I have most enjoyed about the project has been going out in the landscape and meeting people. I enjoy the recording, but it is also an excuse to go out and experience things that I wouldn't otherwise do.
- Part of the significance of place is the connection between your own personal biography and what you are researching. That is how authenticity works, and having that experience that links these things.
- In a project like ScRAP information is fed into the centre. For motivation and to help people feel part of the national project, there needs to be reflection on what information at national level, such as partial results, is fed back to local groups.
- What do we do about communities in Scotland where there is no rock art?
- At Faifley the archaeology was in some ways incidental to the project, and local people are thinking creatively about local disused land, rather than the rock art specifically, which both assists the project and helps bring the community together. That model can be seen in other

areas with other types of monuments, so even without rock art opportunities of this sort exist.

- There is a broader systemic problem with the historic environment, both in academic terms and management terms. With ScRAP the intention is to create a large, national dataset, leading to a flow towards the centre of information generated in the field. This raises a tension and can be seen almost as an extractive process.
- The Ross-shire rock art project generated a lot of data but which was too varied to make into a database. ScRAP provides a single structure applying nationally making data produced across the country more useful. Using such a structure, it might be possible to run a project on a regional basis; however, there are advantages in a national. However, in a five-year project we need to think about the progressive nature of feedback.
- The Ross-shire rock art project was an inspiration for ScRAP, but carried out at a national level. One of the reasons for this conference is to share our preliminary results, and when the analysis is done it will be fed back to local groups.

**Question 2: how do we make sure that we fully understand the cultural significance of Scotland's rock art, and that it is properly valued by heritage organisations and the wider public?**

<https://scarf.scot/thematic/future-thinking-on-carved-stones-in-scotland/4-understanding-value/4-3-ways-of-valuing/>

- The best way to understand cultural significance is to ask people, but that is not done as a matter of course.  
Concepts of significance and value depend on who is being asked – academics, communities, or rock art experts. Rock art's significance in Scotland now is probably higher than over the last 100 years, but neither significance nor value is static which makes them difficult to fold into policy.  
One reason rock art has become more significant is that engagement and the digital recording process make what is being recorded more significant. Projects like ScRAP can raise their profile within the community, for landowners, it can be important that research is associated with a national heritage project and, at an academic level, rock art's significance is enhanced by the data produced by ScRAP.  
Engagement with heritage projects can bring benefits such as well-being, inclusivity and community-making but these are seen as incidental to academic outputs. Perhaps the approach should be reversed to make the principal focus the benefits to communities.
- This focus on academic outputs is linked to funding and a better balance is needed. However, contemporary value is not only social value: academic values are also an important part of that mix of contemporary values and should not be dismissed as academic specialist interest. Values should not be polarised, but brought together in a fruitful way; however, funding streams may not allow us to do that.
- Rock art has only recently started to be brought into the prehistoric discourse, helped by developments like excavation and digital recording. However, understanding of rock art and its context is at an early stage and we cannot currently answer questions about the people who carved it and their lives.
- Context is key and rock art has to be understood in terms of the society of the period, and both at a local and a national/international level. As well as understanding cultural significance awareness about it has to be raised, as when Faifley Rocks went to the Scottish Parliament. A major project with large-scale funding raises rock art's profile.
- Rock Art has struggled for a profile within archaeology. In large-scale management terms it differs from cairns and castles because of the lack of secure dates and difficulties in its interpretation. We have failed to translate to decision makers and politicians the excitement of rock art as well as other aspects of its cultural significance, such as its relation to the landscape. A project like this is valuable in raising its profile and opening up its significance.
- It is easy, and does rock art a disservice, to fall back on tropes mystery and enigma when in fact we have a lot of information on its environmental, landscape and social context. We need to make more of the fact that we do have tools to understand rock art.
- However, we should not downplay the fact that people find rock art beautiful and the experience of engaging with it in its own right is of significance.
- The necessity for accuracy should not suck the joy out of what we are doing as professionals, and this is also part of rock art's significance to communities. At the same time, it is also important to ensure information gathered is put into the record. The numbers of people looking at records in Canmore shows the value of the work of community groups.
- I have had enormous joy from this project. I don't express easily the emotional part of the experience, but I suspect that most people in community groups are more outgoing and emotional.

- To counter the point raised about the tropes of mystery in relation to rock art: we should not underestimate the complexity and challenge of revealing the rich layers of information which we have when working with community groups.

Work around values during the project has revealed reticence in talking about the aspect of affect – how you feel about it in the field – and in speculating on meaning. A longitudinal survey of people engaged over the period of the project has shown they are still reticent to discuss ‘meaning’ with someone who might be perceived as an academic.

**Question 3: The ScRAP website and database have enhanced public access to detailed information about Scotland's rock art. How can we continue to enrich and share the rock art database after ScRAP, and balance this against ensuring sustainable physical access?**

<https://scarf.scot/thematic/future-thinking-on-carved-stones-in-scotland/7-looking-forward/>

- The long-term legacy of the websites and databases connected to specific projects must be considered, as information can be lost as a result of short-term funding which does not cover website maintenance. However, the usefulness of both national repositories and the HERs needs to be examined. National databases like Canmore are a good jumping off point for authoritative information, but should not be the only source of information. It is important not to forget linking information to Canmore or HER references.
- There are a variety of locations where information can be found, such as Canmore, Pastmap and the HER records. These sites are often based on the same information, or sub-sets of it, but it is important that things are available in one place but accessible in different ways so that, for instance, they can be used and augmented by the local HER. The feed through of information needs to be quicker.
- Should everything ultimately be going into Canmore and then into the HERs, or could local groups disseminate that information first even if the ultimate aim is the national database?
- It would be a waste of time to enter data twice and would risk entries being slightly different. There should be a primary record, with everything else providing access to that. For that reason, information should come from ScRAP and be the same as on ScRAP, rather than entered separately into the HER. However, the time taken for that to happen is frustrating.
- Is softer data, such as stories, being captured along with the archaeological information?
- There is an opportunity when recording to do that, but it has not been well captured. If I went back to the beginning of the project I would do it differently, but I did not appreciate the significance of information of that type.
- Both the Highland HER and MyCanmore allow user-generated content, and MyCanmore encourages different reflections and content, from personal and emotional information to factual reports. Anecdotally, this type of information is appreciated, even within commercial archaeology, as it gives a picture of the value and significance to the local community.

**Question 4: What more can be done to encourage and facilitate future research, and what should the research priorities be (e.g. archaeological, cultural significance and value, conservation)?**

- Once the data has been brought together, there is a huge amount we need to understand about the management of rock art out in the landscape, where it belongs.
- The learning points about prehistoric rock art need to be brought within the consideration of carved stones more widely, as a touchstone for wider attitudes to the historic environment and management practice. We have already given a lot of thought to this in Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland. This applies both research findings and the wider discussion points raised.
- It is good to see gender balance on this panel, but it is all white. We need to continue to increase public interest by telling accessible stories. Atlantic rock art contains stories about shared heritage and identities, and also movement of ideas and perhaps movement of people. Modern Europe and modern Scotland are diverse, and maybe the enigmatic nature of rock art and the lack of academic consensus around its interpretation mean it is a good topic to encourage people with different cultural backgrounds to get involved. For example, what might someone of a West African background make of rock art?
- One of the things that appeals to me is that the experts don't have the answers. Much academic work seems to be narrow and focussed, and I would hope that future research would be broader and not just focus on rock art itself.
- Prehistoric rock art research needs to be mainstreamed within Neolithic and Bronze Age studies, so it is not just a paragraph or two in a synthesis, but woven into the mainstream Neolithic narrative. We have done this over the last 10 or 20 years with research on settlement and everyday life.
- It is an interesting moment for rock art as it is enfolded into broader research on the Neolithic. In the same way, public perceptions are in flux, and I would be interested in qualitative research around people who do not have, or have not been asked to have, an interest in rock art.