

Prehistoric landscape of Tynedale North of the Wall

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Prehistory in the Tynedale landscape north of Hadrian's Wall.

For many people local archaeology and history is focused around Hadrian's Wall, understandably a magnet for visitors from all over the world. The old version of history depicting the Romans bringing civilisation to northern British savages has not entirely disappeared from the popular view. The Wall is often still regarded as having been the dividing line protecting civilisation from the untameable barbarians to the north.

Whilst many people now realise that this version is far from accurate the historical literature and archaeological record are dominated by the results of research into the Roman period. Funding and resources for archaeological investigations have been so heavily weighted in this direction that the history of the people of the area before and immediately after the Roman occupation remains sparsely documented, with much of what is known being the preserve of a few experts and not readily accessible to the general public.

Using skills and knowledge we had acquired from our participation in the Altogether Archaeology volunteer project we spent much of 2012 conducting our own landscape survey centred upon Ravensheugh Craggs and extending about 5km south to Sewingshields Craggs. The reports we prepared are now being taken up by National Park archaeologists as the basis for further investigations.

This article presents our personal view of what we have found, including some theories that have yet to be proved, or disproved.

Background.

The area around Ravensheugh Craggs has a number of known prehistoric features that include:

- i) Goatstones 'Four Poster' type stone circle, thought to be of Bronze Age date, each stone being decorated with cup-marks.
- ii) A further 16 cup-marked stones have been discovered within a few hundred yards. These are recorded in the Stan Beckensall Archives, online at rockart.ncl.ac.uk
- iii) Hut circles of probable Bronze Age date.

Our survey focussed on features of a potentially prehistoric date. Conventionally British prehistory terminates with the arrival of the Romans in 43 AD. The table below shows approximate dates for the periods mentioned in the text, from the end of the last Ice Age around 8,000 BC to the departure of the Romans, bearing in mind that 'Romano-British' culture continued beyond the withdrawal of Roman forces. Dating these periods is subject to debate, but it is agreed that transitions between different periods were gradual and subject to regional variations. We have grouped Iron Age and Romano-British periods together for present purposes because, without excavation of enclosed settlement sites in the area, it is not possible to be more precise about dating merely on the basis of structures now visible on the surface.

Approximate dates	Cultural Period	Key cultural features
8,000 – 4,000 BC	Mesolithic	Nomadic hunter-gatherers.
4,000 – 2,500 BC	Neolithic	First farmers, stone tools.
2,500 – 1,000 BC	Bronze Age	Metal tools. Undefined settlements.
1,000 BC – 500AD	Iron Age & Romano-	Iron tools and weapons.

	British	Enclosed settlements.
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The survey encompassed 3 zones:

1. A core area about 1km around Ravensheugh Crag, including Haggie Rigg.
2. An immediate hinterland extending about a further 2km, including Standingstone Rigg, Townshield Bank, Fox Green, The Carts and Pit Wood. (See Map 2 for Zones 1 and 2)
3. A wider zone extending south as far as Sewingshields Crag encompassing Crow Crag, Kings Crag and Queens Crag. (See Map 3)

Our investigations were greatly helped by the Northumberland National Park aerial photographic study of the Hadrian's Wall Landscape conducted by Tim Gates (2004). Professional archaeologists are rightly cautious about the conclusions they draw from available evidence. In what follows we may stray beyond such constraints, but will aim to distinguish between features identified and our own interpretations.

Our theory.

Although the 4 Poster stone circle has not been excavated it may have had a turf-covered ring cairn inside it, most likely of Bronze Age date. (Burl 1976) To the east, in the lee of the crags we identified over 30 small cairns up to 5m in diameter, some of which may be burial monuments, others of which are probably ancient agricultural clearance cairns in view of their apparent lack of structure. The area in which the cairns most suggestive of burial are found also has at least 15 earthfast stones carved with cup-marks. We regard the conjunction of these two types of feature, within a few hundred metres of the 4 Poster stone circle, to be suggestive of the location having had a ritual significance, serving at some period as a burial ground. The locations of the cup-marked stones appear to delineate the perimeter of the possible burial ground. If our theory is correct the question arises of where the people for whom this was a sacred place lived, and when were the cairns built and the rock art created? It is important to state that the existence of cairns and rock art in close proximity does not of itself prove that the two features were contemporary with each other. Further investigations will be necessary to answer such questions.

With regards to where and when the people who made the carvings and/or buried their dead at Ravensheugh Crag lived there are as yet no definitive answers. However our survey offers some possibilities. Dating prehistoric settlement sites is notoriously difficult without excavation, and even excavation results are not always conclusive. 'Unenclosed settlements' are generally regarded as earlier than 'Enclosed settlements' which are often dated to the Iron Age or Romano-British period. However excavations of Iron Age or Romano-British settlement sites in the North Tyne (Jobey AA5) have yielded evidence of earlier occupation. As well as two probable unenclosed settlements within a few hundred metres of Ravensheugh Crag, there are other unenclosed and enclosed settlements sites in zones 2 and 3, all less than 5 km of the crags.

Evidence of human activity from pollen analysis.

The earliest periods of human presence in the area have left very little visible evidence. Our best existing source is pollen analysis.

Rob Young (NNPA 2005) cites A.J. Moores's analysis of data from Sells Burn, just 3 km SW of Ravensheugh Crag. Moores suggests that the onset of peat development around 3975 BC may indicate the impact of Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups. He postulates that areas of forest may have been cleared to promote the growth of hazel for nuts and to create clearings for grazing animals such as deer, thereby assisting hunting. He adds that tree cover remained substantial despite the onset of peat growth.

The Sells Burn data offers no indication of Neolithic human activity in the area. A marked increase in heathland species in the early Bronze Age may be related to forest clearance to promote heather for grazing animals. Young notes that “heathland development continues at ... Sells Burn” and observes that “we start to see clearance episodes in the uplands from around the middle Bronze Age and this may well tie in with the theory that as the Bronze Age climate ameliorated, and as population may have increased in the region, there was a gradual expansion of settlement and agricultural activity out of the lowlands and on to what we would now perceive as ‘marginal’ habitats.”

When we examine visible archaeological remains within our survey area we find little clear evidence of Neolithic activity, but a significant number of features for which a Bronze Age date would accord with archaeologists’ assessments contained in the Historic Environment Record (HER). Young observes that “Moore’s work reinforces the notion of continued human presence in the Northumberland uplands, with continued clearance activity being documented throughout the later Bronze Age and into the Iron Age.”

Grazing seems to have intensified throughout the Iron Age and into the Roman period. At Sells Burn there are massive increases in grass pollen along with the pollen of plants regarded as ‘weeds’ associated with pastoralism. It is also worth noting that Sells Burn does not show any significant increase in cereals until the period of Roman withdrawal from the line of the Wall. As Moore observes, “this suggests that Roman arable agriculture was no more extensive than that of preceding indigenous Iron Age people.” Sells Burn does show a modest and short-lived regeneration of tree cover in the immediately post-Roman period, with hazel again being the dominant species, though birch and alder do make an appearance.

In summary, apart from some limited clearance activity by Mesolithic hunter-gathers, the earliest pollen analysis evidence for human activity in the area appears in the Bronze Age.

But ... what about Standingstone Rigg stone row?

1 km south-west of Great Lonbrough Farm is the stone alignment at Standingstone Rigg. In ‘Archaeology of the National Park’ (2004) Paul Frodsham refers to this feature in his chapter on the Neolithic period, commenting that it may be an ‘avenue’ that may once have been associated with a burial monument.

The stone row consists of 37 visible stones running 134m north-south up over the scarp of Standingstone Rigg. The figure below records our measurements. There are three sections still extant. Some stones are off-set from one another, perhaps offering support to the hypothesis that the row may have originally formed an ‘avenue’. Of the extant stones the largest gap between parallel stones is 1.7m, although the narrowest is just 0.6m.



Standingstone Rigg Stone Row (mid section) from east.

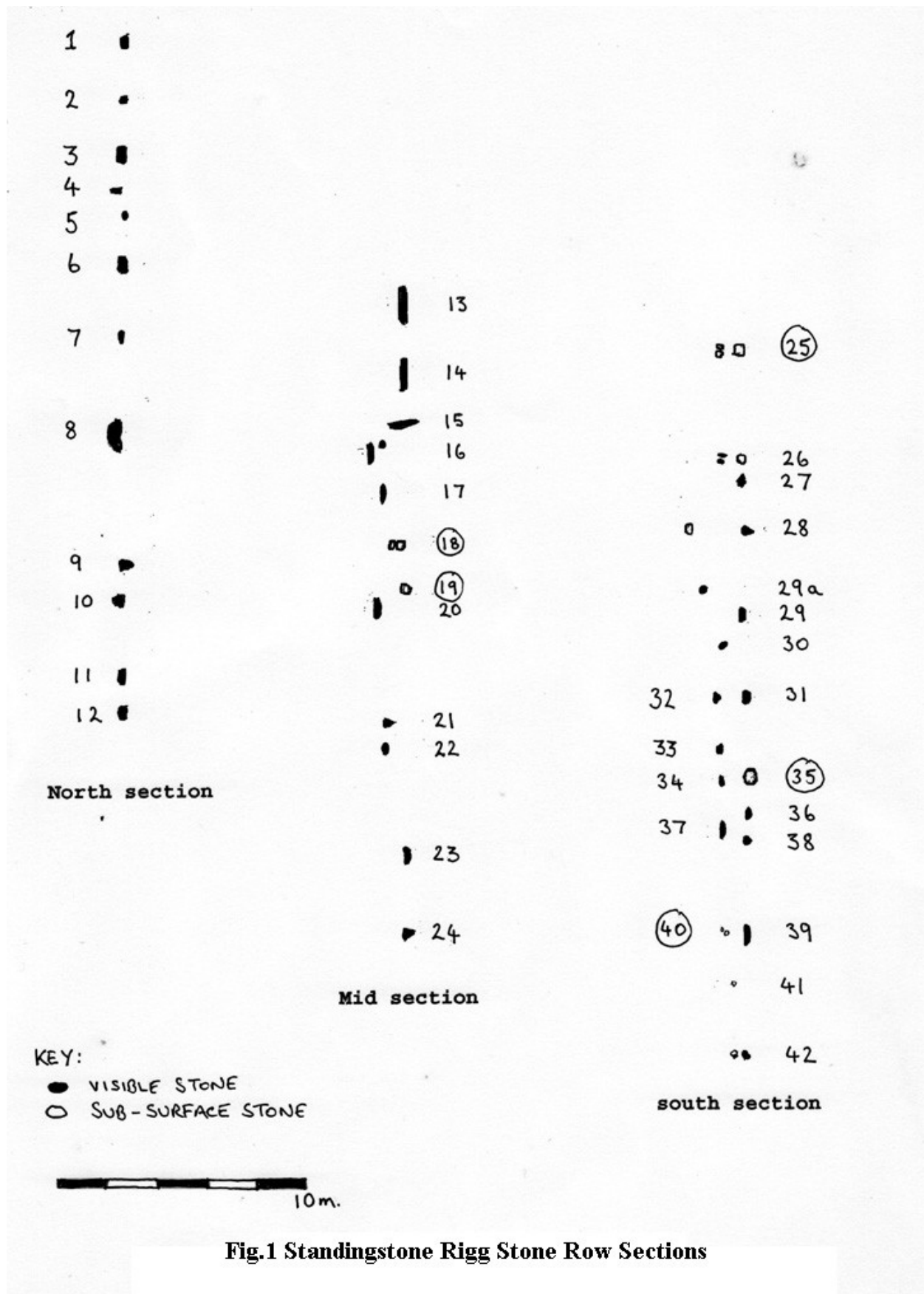


Fig.1 Standingstone Rigg Stone Row Sections

Rob Young in the NNPA Archaeological Research Framework (2005) describes this feature as “most unusual in a Northumbrian context”.

Whatever the chronology of this stone alignment, it stands as an indicator of the current limitations on our capacity to ascribe dating sequences to many of the features identified by landscape survey without subsequent excavation.

Rock Art in context.

The work of Stan Beckensall has placed Northumbrian rock art firmly on the archaeological map. Many people speculate upon the meaning of the cup marks, various cup and rings, spirals and other abstract motifs found on rocks throughout the county and elsewhere. Archaeologists rightly observe that we are unlikely ever to be able to know the minds of the creators of this art. What they do strive to discover is the chronology, function and context of rock art. Gradually some progress is being made, with explanations referencing territorial marking, and burial or other ritual contexts finding support from recent excavation results. Datable evidence remains scarce, but does tend to support a broadly late Neolithic/early Bronze Age chronology. All agree that much remains to be done to resolve the various questions concerning the context of rock art.

The conjunction of features present at Ravensheugh Craggs offers the possibility of advancing our knowledge and understanding concerning some of these questions.



Goatstones Four Poster stone circle eastern cupmarked stone.

Aubrey Burl (1976) identifies Goatstones stone circle as the most southerly example of a category of Four Poster stone circles found principally in Perthshire, raising interesting questions about the transmission of burial monument rituals across northern Britain.

Careful examination by Stan Beckinsall revealed that all four stones bear cupmarks:

East: 12 large cupmarks and 13 smaller ones on top surface.

North: 3, possibly 4, cupmarks among the natural grooves.

West: 4 cups on top and 12 small, faint ones on the side.

South: 4 cups and 2 grooves that may be slightly enhanced by pecking.

Burl's contention that this stone monument probably enclosed a small cairn has not, to our knowledge, been seriously challenged. On his visit in 1970 he noted signs of recent disturbance in the interior that he felt negated the value of excavation. However his subsequent excavation of another Northumbrian 4 Poster, the Three Kings, revealed the remains of a probable ring cairn in its interior. (Burl and Jones AA4)

Burl argues that both these 4 Posters date from, at earliest, the mid-second millennium BC. (Burl 1976)

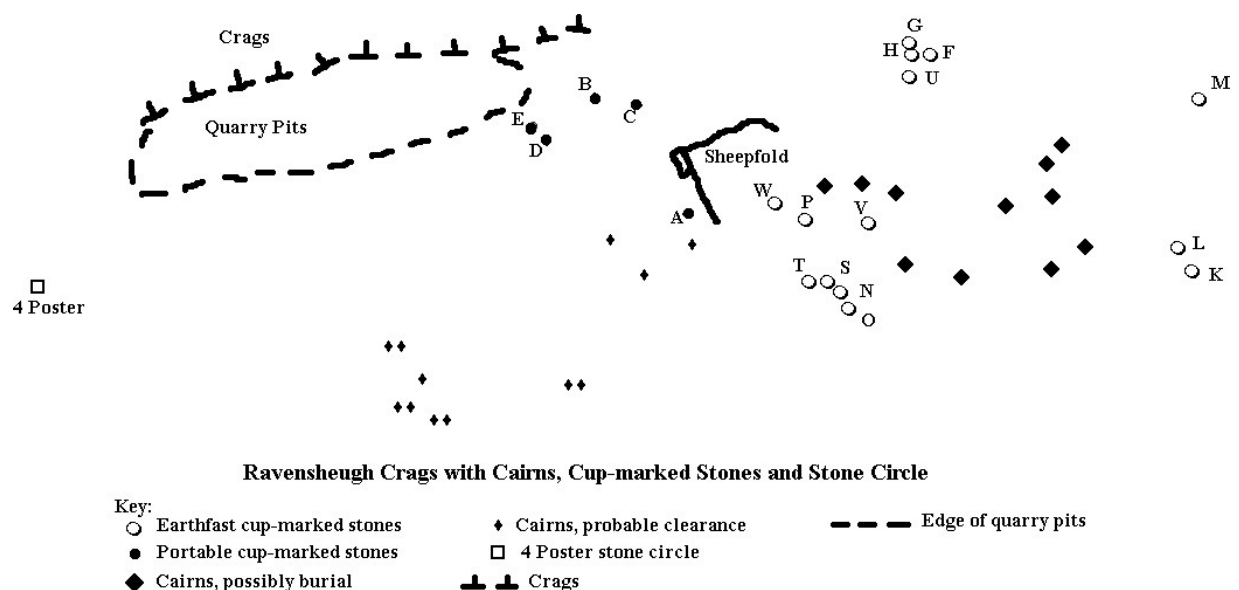
Excavations of Early Bronze Age burial cairns in Cleveland and North Yorkshire revealed the presence of large cup-marked stones in their kerbs. (Vyner 2007) When Stan Beckensall and Aron Mazel revisited Ravensheugh Crag in 2004 as part of the Beckensall On-line Archive project (<http://rockart.ncl.ac.uk>) they discovered a greater number of additional cup-marked stones than they had at any other Northumberland rock art site, bringing the total to 16 in addition to the Four-Poster stones. All the examples of rock art found thus far in the vicinity of Ravensheugh Crag are of simple cup marks without any rings. Apart from a few possible grooves no other motifs have yet been found.

As part of our survey we discovered a further six earthfast cup-marked stones and recorded some three dozen little cairns (up to 5 metres in diameter). Broadly there are two clusters of little cairns. The cairns in the westernmost cairnfield show little sign of structure and appear to be of a clearance type. Some of the cairns in the eastern cluster show more signs of structure, and one has a single cup-mark portable stone on its surface and strong indications of larger kerbing stones.



Cairn with portable stone J

Mapping the locations of the little cairns and the cup-marked stones highlighted an interesting spatial relationship, as illustrated by Map 1.



Map 1

The eastern cairnfield, with its better candidates for burial cairns, is overlooked from the west by a natural rise along which there is a concentration of earthfast cup-marked stones. Near the eastern extreme of this cairnfield is found the most highly decorated of the earthfast stones (Beckensall and Mazel's stone K). Decorated stones L and M could be interpreted as marking, along with K, the eastern edge of the cairnfield territory. There is a further grouping of earthfast decorated stones (Beckensall and Mazel's F, G, H and our new U) on the ridge running east from the crags, possibly delineating the northern edge of the eastern cairnfield.



New Stone U



Stone K

Do the shared features of the 4 Poster's cup-marks and the nearby earthfast and portable decorated stones imply that they were created by the same group of people around the same time? At present there is insufficient evidence to support a definitive answer.

The decorated stones of the 4 Poster could be regarded as a special instance of the type of large decorated kerb stones identified by Blaise Vyner in North Yorkshire and Cleveland. Do any of the possible burial cairns further east contain decorated kerb stones? One possible kerbed cairn does contain a portable stone bearing a single cupmark.

Where did the people live?

1. Unenclosed Settlements

None of the possible settlement sites in the area have been excavated and any suggestions of time periods are based upon archaeologists' assessment of visible structures (HER) and comparisons with similar structures elsewhere. Beneath the crags on a small rise a few hundred yards north are the remains of two or three hut circles (round houses) in an unenclosed settlement. This site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument officially described as of the Bronze Age period. A few hundred yards west of the 4 Poster stone circle Tim Gates' air photographic survey identified further remains as 'Broadpool Common Unenclosed Settlement', describing the site as

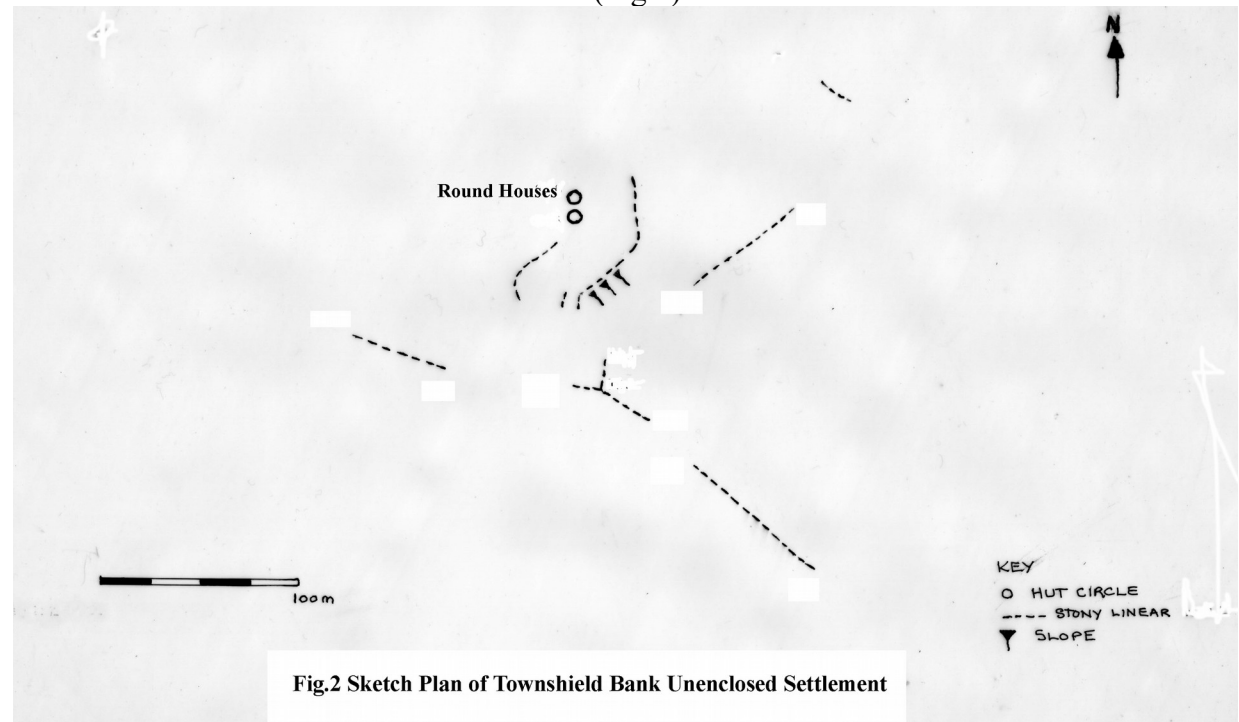
probable Bronze Age. Inspection of this site raised some questions about the interpretation of the various earthworks. It is hoped that a detailed topographical survey, part of a planned National Park/ Altogether Archaeology volunteer project will provide some clarification.

On the ridge of Haggie Rigg, overlooking the Ravensheugh Crag cairnfields we discovered three curvilinear structures that might be a third unenclosed settlement site.

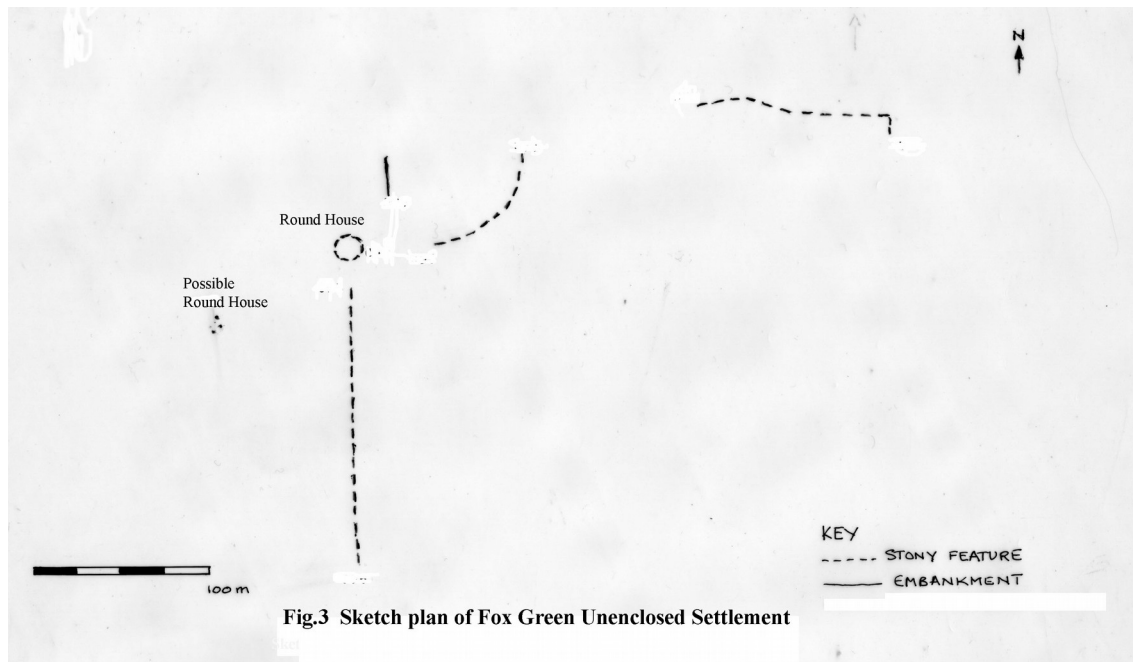
In addition to these nearest sites there are, within 2km, several other probable settlement sites of both unenclosed and enclosed types.

On Townshield Bank, a few hundred metres south of the Standingstone Rigg Stone Row, there stand two adjacent unenclosed round houses.

On visiting the site we discovered a number of stony linear features, possibly the remains of walls related to the round houses. (Fig.2)



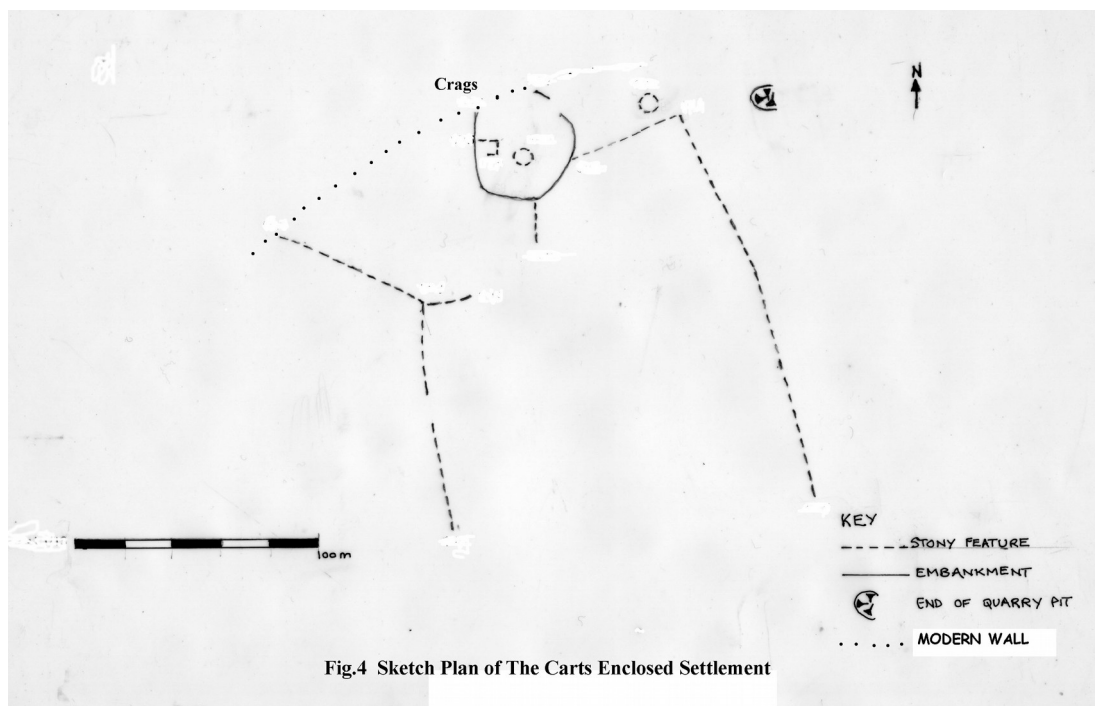
About 1km east along Townshield Bank, at Fox Green, is the site of another unenclosed round house, where we also discovered possible remains of possibly related walls. (Fig.3) About 100m SW of the single round house we found a low stony arc that may be the remains of another unenclosed round house.



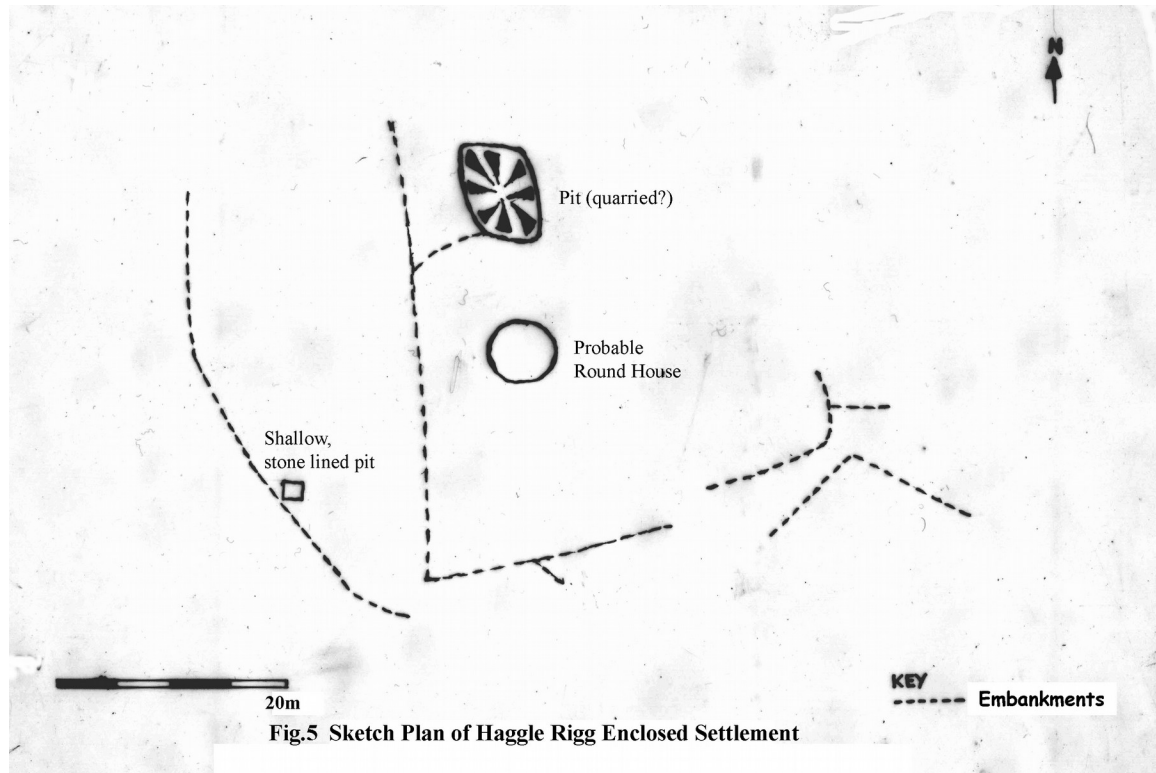
The ‘unenclosed settlement’ sites discussed thus far are thought to date from the Bronze Age. ‘Enclosed settlements’ are generally regarded as of Iron Age or Romano-British date.

2. Enclosed Settlements.

Another kilometre east from Fox Green is an enclosed settlement at The Carts, identified from the air as a sub-rectangular enclosed settlement with an entrance in the NE facing side (Gates 2004). It has one evident interior round house. About 40 metres east, outside the enclosure, the remains of possible round house pose interesting questions concerning its relationship to the enclosed settlement. There are fragmentary field walls and patches of cord rig, indicating cultivation, in the surrounding area.



Also within 2km of Ravensheugh Crag are the remains of three further enclosed settlements at Haggie Rigg, Pit Wood and Catless Farm. (See Map 1) Haggie Rigg Enclosed Settlement is a sub-triangular enclosure with SE facing entrance, a scooped enclosure interior and the remains of a possible round house. Gates identifies it as Iron Age/Romano-British, although he notes that this assessment requires further confirmation. We found additional features not mentioned in the HER details. The southern section of the main sub-triangular enclosure wall has some interesting apparently associated banked features that we feel warrant further consideration. (Fig.5)

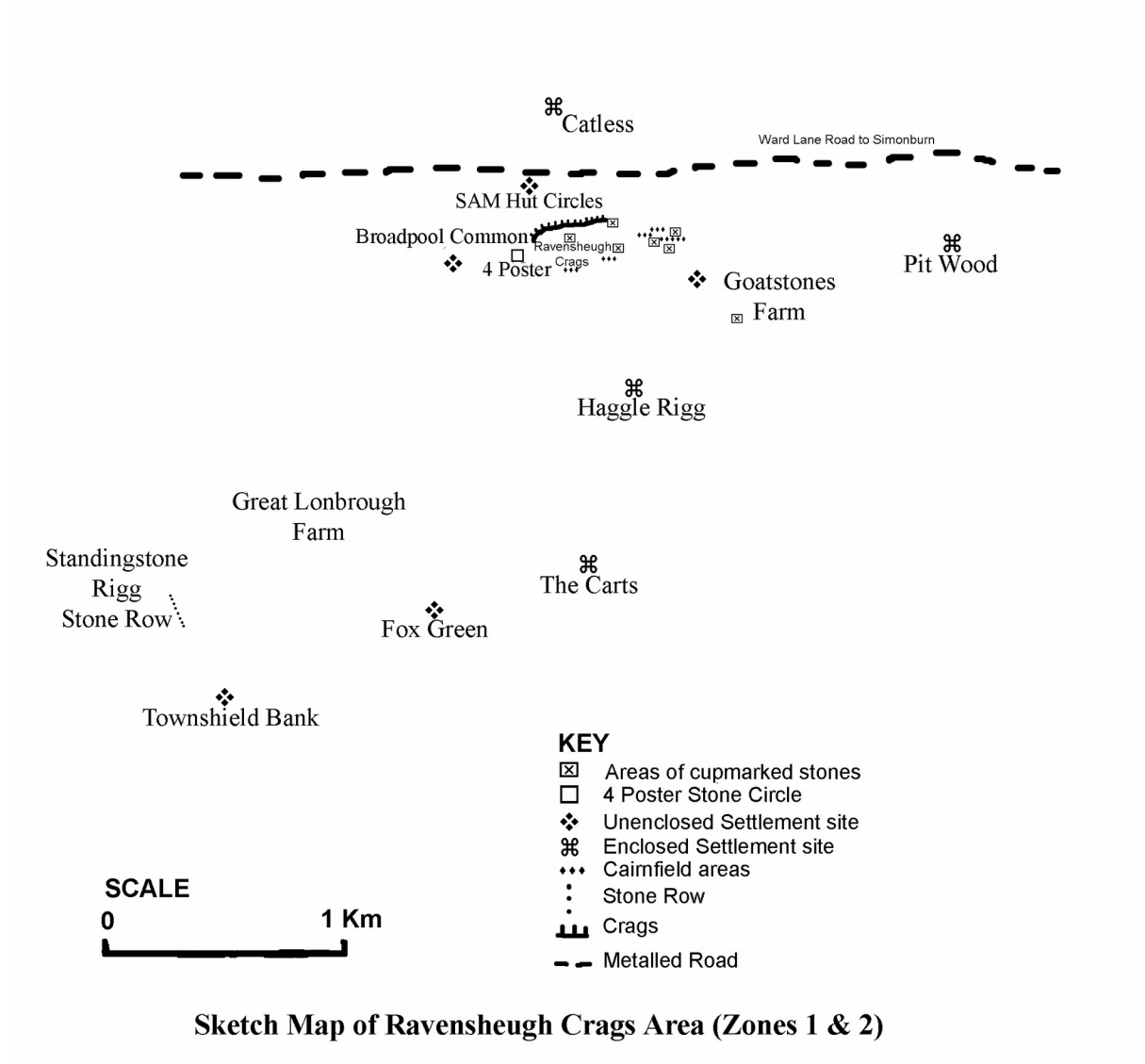


Why are we discussing these Iron Age/Romano-British enclosed settlement sites in the context of Bronze Age habitation?

Although the remains visible today on the surface have been classified as being later than the Bronze Age without excavation there is no way of knowing when these sites were first occupied. Excavations of settlement sites elsewhere in the North Tyne (Jobey) discovered evidence of habitation from periods earlier than the extant surface remains. Archaeologists have a saying that 'a good site is a good site, is a good site', meaning that if a site was a good location for habitation in one era it is likely to have also been good for habitation during other periods.

Furthermore if we wish to discover more about people who lived north of Hadrian's Wall before, during and after the Roman occupation these settlement sites, which have been neither excavated nor professionally surveyed, offer a rich resource for future study.

Map 2 shows the location of all the settlements sites discussed above in relation to the cairns and cup-marked stones near Ravensheugh Crag.

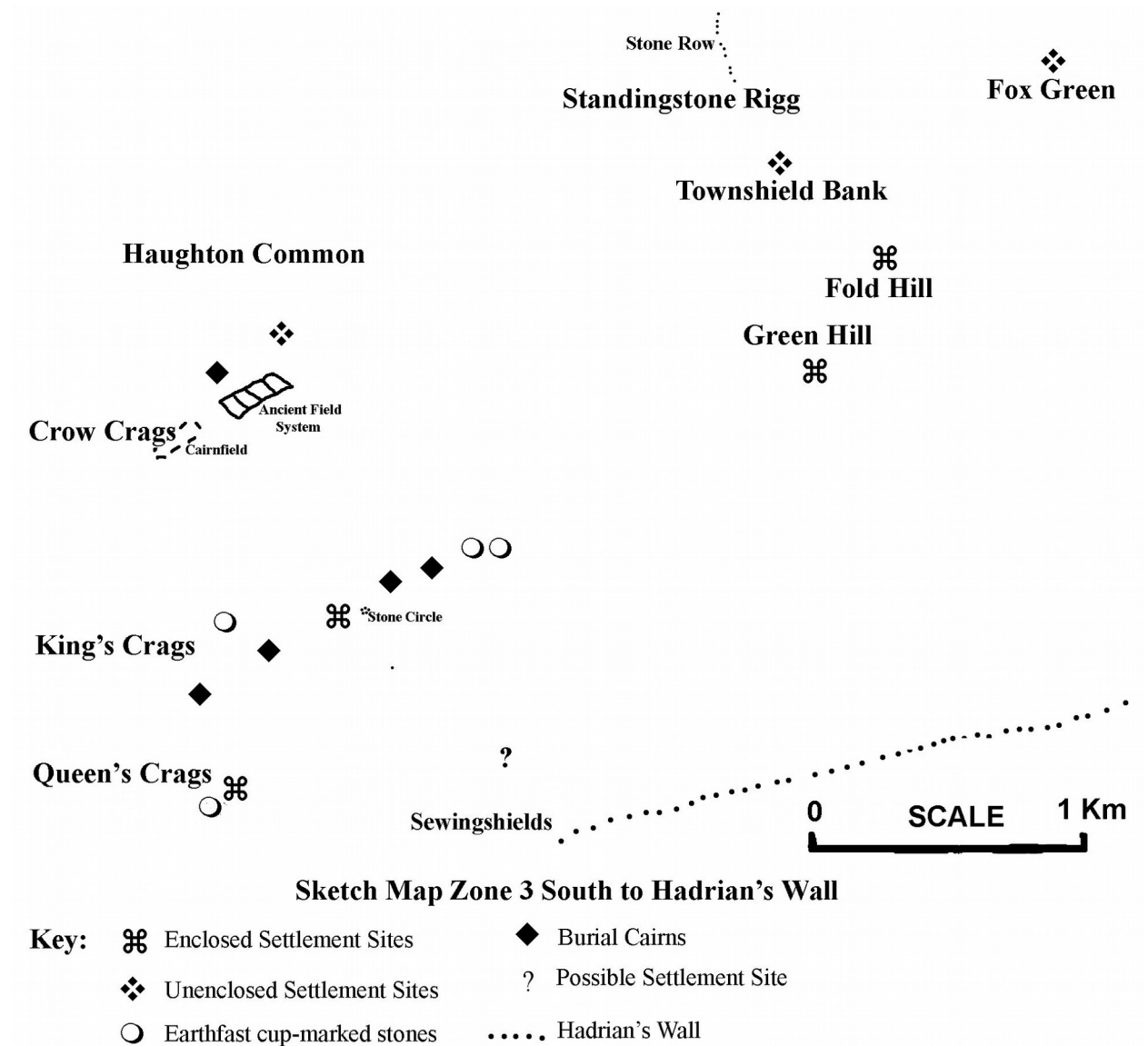


Map 2

At the 9 unenclosed and enclosed sites in Zone 2 our survey revealed no evidence of cairns or other potential signs of burial. If the cairnfields at Ravensheugh Crag do contain any significant number of burial cairns the absence of burial-related features near surrounding settlement sites would reinforce the likelihood that it may have served as a burial ground for several settlements in its hinterland.

Further south towards Hadrian's Wall. (Zone 3)

Map 3 indicates further features that may help us to place the site at Ravensheugh Crag in a wider local context.



Map 3

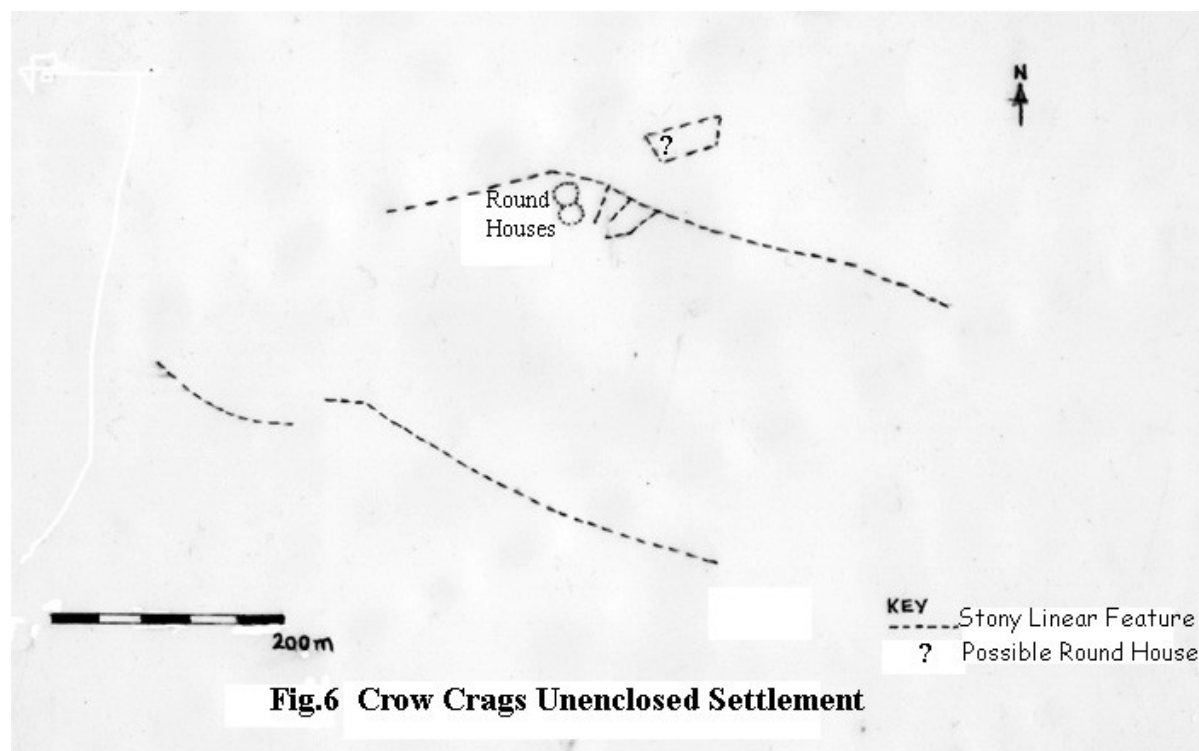
At King's Crag 1km north of the Sewingshields Crag there is a concentration of burial cairns, together with a stone circle and a few cupmarked earthfast rocks. The known Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) and Historic Environment Record (HER) sites in the vicinity of Kings Crag suggest that it was a significant focus for Bronze Age burial and ritual activity.

The largest stony cairn is of 17m diameter and has scheduled monument listing as a 'round cairn of Bronze Age date'. About 300m to the west of this are three further SAM listed Bronze Age round cairns each about 10m diameter. At the centre of one lies a large broken slab, thought to be a cist cover. 500m east of Kings Crag, near the remains of a stone circle are three further scheduled round cairns ranging from 10m to

3.5m in diameter. Nearby is a small cairn recorded as 'a prehistoric ritual feature of 3-5m diameter'. Some 250m to the east is an embanked circular enclosure interpreted as a possible robbed cairn about 20m diameter. Two cup-marked earthfast stones lie a further 200m to the east.

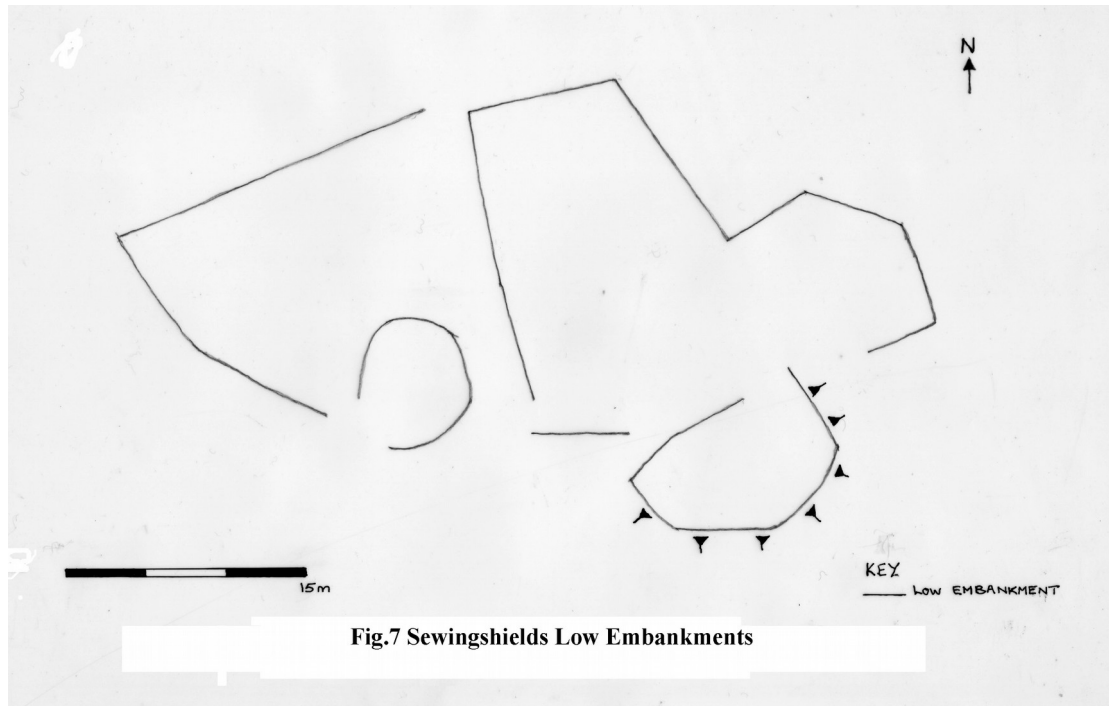
It is beyond our current scope to attempt detailed interpretation of this concentration of prehistoric burial monuments, together with a stone circle. However it is reasonable to regard the area as having been a special site for burial activities during the Bronze Age, possibly being a focus for a number of surrounding settlements.

Some 600m north of Kings Crag there is a cairnfield on the slopes of Crow Crag comprising about 30 little cairns which lie 200m west of a relatively well preserved collection of field boundaries. These little cairns show none of the structural features usually associated with burial cairns. The location of these cairns adjacent to a field system further suggests a clearance function for the cairnfield. Some 400m further north east from the field system lie the extensive remains of Crow Crag Unenclosed Settlement believed to be of Bronze Age date. There appear to be a number of enclosure walls a few metres east of the two unenclosed round houses, plus a possible enclosed round house a few metres further east. There are also longer boundary walls that appear related to the habitation. (Fig.6)



There are no further known unenclosed settlement sites in the area, although we did discover a collection of very low shallow embankments just north of Sewingshields Farm. These embankments could be of almost any age and function, so any initial interpretation is speculative and very provisional. The site, see Fig.7, extends about 50m E-W and 30m N-S, comprising a number of connecting lengths of embankment with a possible circular feature about 6m in diameter and a possible sub-rectangular enclosure about 13m x 9m on a raised platform.

The plan of the site is not incompatible with it having been an unenclosed settlement with perhaps a stock enclosure but further survey or excavation would be necessary to move beyond speculation.



There are four enclosed settlement sites, attributed to the Iron Age or Romano-British periods, at King's Crag, Queen's Crag, Fold Hill, and Green Hill. We have already discussed the general possibility that such remains may represent only the final stage of habitation rather than its origins.

To our surprise just 50 metres west of the known enclosed settlement near Queen's Crag we discovered an unrecorded large earthfast heavily cupmarked boulder.



Boulder from west



Boulder from south, note quarry marks

Conclusion.

If at some time during the Bronze Age there had been two separate significant burial sites within about 4 kilometres of each other many questions arise, including:

What was the chronological sequence of the two sites?

What differences of burial practice can be discerned both between and within the two sites?

Were the two sites ever in use during the same period, and if so, can we discover anything about their relationships?

As discussed earlier, the site at Ravensheugh Craggs offers considerable potential to add significantly to our understanding of the context of prehistoric rock art in

Northumberland, and the Northumberland National Park Authority has already facilitated further investigations here, with professional archaeologists directing the work of local volunteers.

Many of the sites identified in this article have yet to be fully surveyed, and none have been the subject of any systematic excavation. As far as we are aware our sketch plans of the various settlements represent the first attempt to map these features.

There is enormous potential for further investigations that could enhance our understanding of the lives of those who lived in our area from the earliest settled habitation during the Bronze, or possibly even Neolithic, Age through to the Romano-British era.

There is so much potential for a long-term programme of investigations, including extending into the medieval period and up to more recent times, that a community group, Tynedale North of the Wall Archaeology Group (Honorary President Stan Beckensall), is being established to enable local people to take a leading role in uncovering more of the history of their predecessors north of the Roman Wall. If you are interested in more information contact tynedalearchaeology@gmail.com

We are grateful for the invaluable assistance of NNPA Archaeologists Chris Jones and Gemma Stewart, plus Stan Beckensall, Aron Mazel and Blaise Vyner who have generously given our endeavours the support of their expertise, and local farmers Alistair Lee and Michael Atkinson who have helped us with their local knowledge.

Text ... Phil Bowyer

Sketch Plans ... Anne Bowyer

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