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Darkness Visible

The Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, from the Bronze Age to the Picts

Ian Armit and Lindsey Büster

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Darkness Visible



This volume is dedicated to the original excavators of the Sculptor's Cave
(left to right: Alexandra 'Lekky' Shepherd, Sylvia Benton and Ian Shepherd)

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The Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, from the Bronze Age to the Picts

IAN ARMIT and LINDSEY BÜSTER

Based on excavations by Ian and Alexandra Shepherd, and Sylvia Benton

With contributions by

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Jacket images: (front) a cervical vertebra from the Sculptor's Cave, with cut marks indicative of decapitation (photograph: Rick Schulting);
(reverse) the interior of the Sculptor's Cave, looking out through the twin entrance passages (photograph: Ian Armit)

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SUMMARY

The Sculptor's Cave, on the south coast of the Moray Firth, some 64km east of Inverness in north-east Scotland, takes its name from a series of Pictish symbols which adorns its distinctive twin entrance passages. Excavations by Sylvia Benton in 1928–30 and by Ian and Alexandra Shepherd in 1979 produced a large assemblage of metalwork and other artefacts from the Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age, including several gold-covered hair rings and one of the largest Roman Iron Age coin hoards known from the north of Britain. They also recovered more than 1600 disarticulated human bones including several cervical vertebrae displaying cut marks consistent with decapitation.

While Sylvia Benton's work was published fairly promptly (Benton 1931), the more detailed stratigraphic excavations carried out by the Shepherds have remained unpublished until now. This publication is the result of renewed work on the Sculptor's Cave archive between 2014 and 2018, comprising a full analysis of the Shepherds' excavations and their integration with Benton's earlier findings. A key element for reanalysis of the site was the creation of a comprehensive chronological framework, through Bayesian modelling of 51 AMS dates obtained during the post-excavation programme. This has confirmed that the Sculptor's Cave saw a long history of use and veneration, particularly from the Late Bronze Age to the Late Roman Iron Age.

While the specific nature of activity within the cave varied significantly over more than a millennium of use, it appears consistently to have focused on ritualised practices associated with treatment of the dead and with votive deposition. The site's enduring status as a special place within the local landscape may have derived from its liminal position between the above-ground world of the living and the below-ground world of spirits and ancestors. This liminality is also reflected in the cave's location: cut off by high tide and separated from the land by steep sea cliffs. The lengths that individuals went to in order to access the site suggests that the cave was specially sought out for particular kinds of activity. It was certainly never used for long-term habitation and it is unlikely to have been visited in the course of daily activities.

During the Late Bronze Age (Phase 1: beginning around 1050–975 *cal BC*), the cave was a focus for mortuary practices involving principally (though not exclusively) the bodies of young children. At this time the cave seems not to have been a place of primary disposal of the dead, but rather a place where bodies were brought after a period of curation elsewhere. These bodies, adorned with valuable items of personal ornament such as copper alloy bracelets and gold-covered hair rings, appear to have been deposited essentially as mummy bundles. This activity was

associated with a sequence of stake-built structures situated at the inner part of the West Passage. These structures, possibly representing timber screens or racks, would have served to control access to the interior of the cave, which appears to have contained a pool of stagnant water at this time. Spreads of pottery, animal bones and plant remains suggest that the preparation and consumption of food took place alongside funerary activity, perhaps as an intrinsic part of the mortuary rites conducted in the cave.

Although there is no evidence for the deposition of human remains in the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Phase 2: between around the ninth century BC and the first century AD), large spreads of pottery and the continued accumulation of anthropogenic deposits attest to the continued use of the cave. Given the location, it is probable that this activity was, as before, non-domestic in character. Structures appear to have existed at this time under the entrance canopy and features within both entrance passages suggest that access to the cave was controlled. After the destruction of some of these structures by fire, during the middle centuries of the first millennium BC, the character of the deposits within the entrance passages changed, with less evidence for trampling and compaction and a marked reduction in the density of artefactual, faunal and botanical material. Throughout this period, the interior would have remained wet and probably still contained a pool of standing water. This apparently low-level activity included a dog burial in the West Passage dated to 400–200 *cal BC*.

During the Roman Iron Age (Phase 3: spanning the late first to fourth centuries AD), the dried-out interior of the cave became the focus of activity, including the presence of hearths (as reported by Benton). It was during this period that the cave once again assumed a more obvious mortuary character. Indeed, the majority of the human remains from the cave (representing a minimum of 33 individuals, but probably many more) seem to belong to this period. In contrast to the Late Bronze Age activity, the individuals represented were predominantly adults and the specific composition of the bone assemblage indicates that bodies entered the cave intact (although certain body parts appear subsequently to have been removed). Numerous small, personal items, such as ring-headed pins, toilet instruments and necklaces, may have adorned the bodies, or were perhaps deposited as votives. A deposit of fourth-century coins, comprising a small number of official Roman issues and many more indigenous copies, represents an exceptional find in this region, far north of the Roman province.

The most dramatic episode within the cave's history occurred at some point between *cal AD 240–325*, when at least six individuals (four adults and two adolescents) were decapitated. The scale of

this event, and its context in a period of social upheaval following the withdrawal of Roman influence in the region, suggests that it may have been politically motivated; perhaps the removal of an elite group by their competitors. Whatever the specific motivation for the killings, the use of such an inaccessible place, long associated with votive and funerary activity, suggests a strong ritualised dimension.

The enigmatic Pictish symbols around the cave's twin entrance passages appear to mark the end of the main period of the site's use. Although traditionally dated rather later, it is possible that these symbols were carved as early as the late fourth century, and may have served to memorialise the dead within the cave, or perhaps represent the symbolic closure of a spiritually dangerous pagan place.

RÉSUMÉ

La *Sculptor's Cave* (Grotte du Sculpteur), sur la côte sud du Moray Firth (64km à l'est d'Inverness), dans le nord-est de l'Écosse, tire son nom d'une série de symboles pictes qui ornent ses deux entrées. Les fouilles effectuées par Sylvia Benton entre 1928 et 1930, ainsi que par Ian et Alexandra Shepherd en 1979, ont fourni un important ensemble d'objets en métal ou autres de la période de l'âge du Bronze Final et de l'âge du Fer romain (*Roman Iron Age*, qui désigne les phases les plus récentes de l'âge du Fer contemporaines de l'occupation romaine de la Bretagne). Cet ensemble comprend plusieurs 'anneaux à cheveux' (*hair rings*) en or, ainsi que l'un des plus grands trésors de pièces de monnaie de l'âge du Fer connus au nord de la Grande-Bretagne. Ces fouilleurs ont également récupéré plus de 1600 os humains désarticulés, ainsi que plusieurs vertèbres cervicales présentant des marques de découpe compatibles avec la pratique de la décapitation.

Les travaux de Sylvia Benton ont été publiés assez rapidement (Benton 1931), mais les fouilles stratigraphiques plus détaillées réalisées par les Shepherd n'avaient pas encore été publiées à ce jour. Cette publication est le résultat d'une reprise du travail sur les archives de *Sculptor's Cave* entre 2014 et 2018. Elle comprend une analyse complète des fouilles des Shepherd et intègre leurs résultats aux découvertes antérieures de Benton. Un élément clé de cette nouvelle analyse du site a été la création d'un cadre chronologique complet, grâce à la modélisation Bayésienne de 51 dates AMS obtenues pendant la phase post-fouille. Cela a confirmé que la *Sculptor's Cave* avait connu une longue histoire de fréquentations, souvent à vocation rituelle, en particulier de l'âge du Bronze à la fin de l'âge du Fer romain.

Bien que la nature spécifique de l'activité dans la grotte ait considérablement varié au cours de plus d'un millénaire, elle semble en effet s'être toujours concentrée sur les pratiques ritualisées associées au traitement des morts et à la déposition votive. Le statut du site en tant qu'emplacement particulier dans le paysage a peut-être découlé de sa position liminale, à l'interface entre le monde terrestre des vivants et le monde souterrain des esprits et des ancêtres. Cette liminalité se reflète également dans l'emplacement de la grotte: isolée par la marée haute et séparée de la terre par des falaises abruptes. Les efforts déployés pour accéder au site suggèrent que la grotte a été spécifiquement recherchée pour des activités particulières. Il n'a certainement jamais été utilisée comme habitat durable et il est peu probable qu'elle ait servi de cadre aux activités du quotidien.

Au cours de l'âge du Bronze Final (Phase 1: à partir de 1050–975 cal av. J.-C.), la grotte était un espace réservé aux pratiques mortuaires impliquant principalement (mais pas exclusivement) les corps de jeunes enfants. A cette époque, la grotte ne semble pas

avoir été un espace de disposition primaire des morts, mais plutôt un endroit où les corps étaient amenés après avoir été conservés un certain temps ailleurs. Ces corps, parés d'objets de valeur, tels que des bracelets en alliage cuivreux et des anneaux recouverts d'or pour les cheveux, semblent avoir été déposés essentiellement sous forme de 'mummy bundles'. Cette activité était associée à une série de structures en bois situées dans la partie interne du passage ouest. Ces structures, pouvant représenter des écrans ou des étagères, auraient permis de contrôler l'accès à l'intérieur de la grotte qui semble contenir une mare d'eau stagnante à cette époque. Les épandages de poterie, d'ossements d'animaux et de restes de plantes suggèrent que la préparation et la consommation de nourriture avaient lieu parallèlement à l'activité funéraire, peut-être en tant que partie intégrante des rites mortuaires pratiqués dans la grotte.

Bien qu'il n'existe aucune preuve de dépôt de restes humains au cours de l'âge du Fer pré-romain (Phase 2: entre le IXe siècle avant notre ère et le premier siècle de notre ère), les épandages de poteries et l'accumulation continue de dépôts anthropiques témoignent de la persistante utilisation de la grotte. Compte tenu de son emplacement, il est probable que cette activité avait, comme auparavant, un caractère non domestique. Des structures semblent avoir existé à ce moment-là dans la partie de la grotte donnant sur l'extérieur; les caractéristiques des deux entrées suggèrent par ailleurs que l'accès à la grotte était contrôlé. Après la destruction de certaines de ces structures par le feu, au milieu du premier millénaire avant notre ère, les niveaux qui se sont déposés dans les passages des entrées ont changé de nature, et présentent moins de traces de piétinement et de compactage ainsi qu'une réduction sensible de la densité des artefacts et des écofacts. Pendant toute cette période, l'intérieur serait resté humide et contiendrait probablement encore une mare d'eau stagnante. Cette activité, apparemment de faible intensité, comprend l'enterrement d'un chien dans le *West Passage* (Passage Ouest), entre 400 et 200 ans avant notre ère.

Au cours de l'âge du Fer romain (Phase 3: du premier au quatrième siècle de notre ère), l'intérieur de la grotte, alors asséché, devint le centre de toutes les activités, caractérisées notamment par la présence de foyers (comme le rapportait Benton). C'est durant cette période que la grotte a retrouvé un caractère mortuaire plus évident. En effet, la majorité des restes humains (représentant un minimum de 33 individus, mais probablement beaucoup plus) semble appartenir à cette période. Contrairement à ce qu'on observait pour l'âge du Bronze Final, les individus représentés étaient principalement des adultes. L'étude des restes humains suggère que les corps ont fait l'objet de

dépôts primaires, avant le possible prélèvement de certaines parties anatomiques. De nombreux petits objets personnels, tels que des épingles, des instruments de toilette et des colliers, peuvent avoir orné les corps ou ont peut-être été déposés en tant qu'offrandes. Un dépôt de pièces du quatrième siècle, composé d'un petit nombre de monnaies romaines et de nombreuses copies indigènes, représente une découverte exceptionnelle dans cette région, très au nord de la province romaine.

L'épisode le plus dramatique de l'histoire de la grotte s'est produit entre 240 et 325 ap. J.-C., quand au moins six personnes (quatre adultes et deux adolescents) ont été décapitées. L'ampleur de cet événement, son contexte marqué par la période de bouleversement social qui a suivi le retrait de l'influence romaine

dans la région, suggèrent qu'il pourrait avoir été motivé par des considérations politiques. Il résulte peut-être de l'élimination d'un groupe lignager élitair de la main de leurs concurrents. Quelle que soit la motivation spécifique des massacres, l'utilisation d'un lieu aussi inaccessible, longtemps associé à une activité votive et funéraire, suggère une forte dimension ritualisée.

Les énigmatiques symboles pictes gravés autour des deux entrées de la grotte semblent marquer la fin de la période principale d'utilisation du site. Bien que traditionnellement datés plus tardivement, il est possible que ces symboles aient été sculptés dès la fin du IV^e siècle et aient pu servir à commémorer les morts déposés dans la grotte ou peut-être marquer la fermeture symbolique d'un lieu païen, spirituellement dangereux.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Sculptor's Cave, die 'Höhle des Bildhauers', liegt an der südlichen Küste des Moray Firth, etwa 64km östlich von Inverness im Nordosten Schottlands. Sie ist nach den piktesischen Symbolen benannt, mit denen ihr charakteristischer Doppelingang verziert ist. Die Ausgrabungen, die 1928–30 von Sylvia Benton und 1979 von Ian und Alexandra Shepherd durchgeführt wurden brachten eine grosse Menge von metallenen und anderen Objekten der späten Bronzezeit und der Römischen Eisenzeit zutage, unter anderem mehrere mit Goldfolie verkleidete 'Haarringe' und einen der grössten bisher aus dem nördlichen Britannien bekannten Münzhorte der Römischen Eisenzeit. Ausserdem wurden mehr als 1600 menschliche Knochen gefunden, unter diesen mehre Halswirbel mit Schneidspuren, die auf Enthauptungen hinweisen.

Während Bentons Ausgrabung bald publiziert wurde (Benton 1931), blieb die Arbeit der Shepherds bis jetzt unveröffentlicht. Die Archive und Ergebnisse dieser Grabungen wurden fuer den hier vorgelegten Band zwischen 2014 und 2018 aufgearbeitet und integriert. Eine zentrale Rolle hatte dabei die Konstruktion einer Chronologie mithilfe bayesianischer Modelle der 51 AMS Datierungen inne. So wurde die lange Dauer der Nutzung und die kultischen Bedeutung der Höhle von der Spätbronzezeit bis in die Römische Eisenzeit belegt.

Über mehr als tausend Jahre hinweg scheint die Höhle als liminaler Ort zwischen der Welt der Lebenden und der Toten fuer die Deponierung von Körpern und Objekten genutzt worden zu sein. Der Eindruck der Liminalität der Höhle wird durch ihre Lage – durch steile Klippen vom Land getrennt und während der Flut auch von der Seeseite her abgeschnitten ist – unterstrichen. Diese Abgeschiedenheit macht es wahrscheinlich, dass sie nur für besondere Anlässe aufgesucht wurde und es wurde auch keine Indizen für die Nutzung der Höhle als Siedlungsort gefunden.

In der Spätbronzezeit (Beginn von Phase 1: 1050–975 cal BC), wurde die Höhle vor allem für die Bestattung von Kindern genutzt. Es scheint jedoch, dass die Körper erst hierher gebracht wurden nachdem sie zuvor an einem anderen Ort präpariert worden waren. Die Körper, dekoriert mit wertvollem Bronzearmringen und goldenen 'Haarringen', scheinen als Mumienbündel in der Höhle deponiert worden zu sein. Diese Niederlegungen fanden in der Nähe einer Gruppe von Pfosten im hinteren Teil der westlichen Passage statt und mögen diese vom Inneren der Höhle, in welchem Wasser stand, separiert haben. Keramikscherben, Tierknochen und Pflanzenreste zeigen die Zubereitung und den Verzehr von Nahrungsmitteln an, der vielleicht Bestandteil der Bestattungsrituale war.

In der Vorrömischen Eisenzeit (Phase 2 begann zwischen dem 9. Jh v. Christus und dem 1. Jahrhundert n. Christus), bezeugen zwar Keramikscherben und die Akkumulation von Material anthropogenen Ursprungs die Weiternutzung der Höhle. Es wurden jedoch keine menschlichen Überreste gefunden und angesichts der abgelegenen Lage der Höhle ist es wahrscheinlich dass sie auch in dieser Phase nicht für Siedlungsaktivitäten genutzt wurde. Einbauten, vielleicht in Form von Gestellen oder Trennwänden scheinen zu dieser Zeit unter dem Vordach der Höhle existiert und Einbauten in beiden Passagen den Zugang zur Höhle beschränkt zu haben. In der Mitte des ersten Jahrhunderts vor Christus wurden einiger diese Einbauten durch Brand zerstört und die nachfolgenden Schichten in den Eingangspassagen zeigen eine veränderte Zusammensetzung mit weniger Verdichtung und deutlich weniger Artefakten, Tier und Pflanzenresten. Im hinteren Teil der Höhle stand weiterhin Wasser. Eine Hundebestattung in der westlichen Passage wurde auf 400–200 cal BC datiert.

Während der Römischen Eisenzeit (Phase 3: von dem späten ersten bis zum späten vierten Jahrhundert n. Christus), wurde das nun trockene Innere der Höhle intensiver genutzt, unter anderem, wie von Benton bemerkt, in Form von Herdstellen. Während dieser Phase fanden hier auch wieder Bestattungen statt. Tatsächlich wurden die meisten menschlichen Überreste – von mindestens 33, aber wahrscheinlich mehr Individuen – zu dieser Zeit niedergelegt. Im Gegensatz zur Spätbronzezeit waren dies meist die Bestattungen von Erwachsenen und es scheint dass die Körper intakt in die Höhle eingebracht und bestimmte Körperteile später entfernt wurden. Zahllose kleine persönliche Gegenstände, wie Ringkopfnadeln, kosmetische Instrumente und Halsringe waren mit den Körpern als Grabbeigaben oder Votive niedergelegt. Ein in das 4. Jahrhundert datierter Münzhort, bestehend aus einer kleinen Anzahl offizieller römischer Prägungen und zahlreicher lokaler Kopien stellt so weit nördlich der Römischen Provinzen einen aussergewöhnlichen Fund dar.

Zwischen cal AD 240–325 spielten sich in der Höhle dramatische Ereignisse ab als mindestens sechs Individuen (vier Erwachsene und zwei Jugendliche) enthauptet wurden. Die hohe Anzahl mag andeuten dass die Toten in einer Phase sozialer Unruhe nach dem Ende römischen Einflusses in der Region Opfer eines politisch motivierten Ereignisses wurden; vielleicht handelte es sich um die Beseitigung einer Elitegruppe durch Konkurrenten. Was auch immer der genaue Grund für die Hinrichtungen gewesen sein mag, die Wahl eines so schwer zugängigen Ortes mit einer langen Votiv- und Bestattungstradition betont den stark ritualisierten Charakter der Ereignisse.

Die geheimnisvollen piktischen Symbole im Bereich des Doppeleinganges signalisieren das Ende der Nutzung der Höhle. Obwohl diese Zeichen üblicherweise später datiert werden, ist es möglich, dass sie schon im späten vierten Jahrhundert

geschaffen wurden um der Toten in der Höhle zu gedenken oder einen heidnischen Ort voller spiritueller Gefahren symbolisch zu verschliessen.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

1. Unless otherwise stated, radiocarbon dates (including combined dates) are quoted throughout the volume at 95% confidence. The exceptions are modelled dates, where the 68% confidence range is quoted. Modelled date ranges are in italics throughout.
2. Our title, taken from a description of hell in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, refers to the hidden nature of the mortuary practices that took place in the dark recesses of the Sculptor's Cave (now hopefully illuminated . . .).

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