



Society of Antiquaries  
of **Scotland**

## Darkness Visible

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

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ISBN: 978-1-908332-17-2 (hardback) • 978-1-908332-23-3 (PDF)

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Armit, I and Büster, L 2020 *Darkness Visible: The Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, from the Bronze Age to the Picts*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.  
<https://doi.org/10.9750/9781908332233>

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## CHAPTER 8

# CAVES, COSMOLOGY AND IDENTITY

### 8.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have demonstrated the remarkable longevity of human activity at the Sculptor's Cave and the extraordinary role that it played in the spiritual life of the communities who visited it. As with many caves, however, the wealth of material recovered has not been easy to interpret. Despite Sylvia Benton's best efforts, the excavation and recording methods of her day were insufficient to tease out the subtle and complex stratigraphy, especially in the dark confines of the cave. In particular, the challenges inherent in understanding a large, disarticulated human bone assemblage could not be met by the osteological methods available in the first half of the twentieth century, and the cursory reports delivered by the anatomists involved in the original analysis of the Sculptor's Cave material betray a lack of appreciation of its potential. While this is entirely understandable, the subsequent disposal of all but a handful of the bones remains unfortunate, and although the surviving handwritten lists provide a certain degree of information, much more detailed interpretations would have been possible had the bones themselves survived.

The archive derived from the Shepherds' excavations has been much more amenable to reanalysis. Nonetheless, their work was constrained by excavation of only relatively small and spatially isolated blocks of sediment left in place at the end of Benton's campaign. Within such restricted areas, fine-grained stratigraphy was difficult to read and structural evidence was inevitably partial. The time that has elapsed between fieldwork, post-excavation and publication has also led to unavoidable difficulties of interpretation.

Despite these problems, combining the evidence from the Benton and Shepherd archives with the benefit of recent methodological developments has allowed for a more detailed picture to emerge. Indeed, the delay between excavation and analysis has presented its own opportunities, allowing for the application of analytical techniques which were unavailable at the time. AMS radiocarbon dating and Bayesian analysis has, for example, greatly refined our chronological framework for activity at the cave, while modern osteological examination of the surviving human remains, along with element index analysis of the bone lists, has added greater depth to our understanding of the changing funerary role of this enigmatic site.

The publication of the Sculptor's Cave coincides with a resurgence of academic interest in the prehistoric and later use of subterranean environments. Major recent works include Marion

Dowd's (2015; 2016) syntheses of caves in Ireland, as well as larger European (Bergsvik and Skeates 2012; Bergsvik and Dowd 2018) and global (Moyes 2012) surveys. Meanwhile, broader discussions have considered the unique nature of cave environments (Dowd and Hensey 2016) and the theoretical and technical challenges they pose (Büster et al 2019b). At the same time, there has been increasing recognition of the complex and potentially protracted nature of later prehistoric funerary practices and significant methodological advances in the ways in which disarticulated and commingled human bone assemblages are approached (eg Armit 2012; 2017; Osterholtz et al 2014; Booth and Madgwick 2016; Crozier 2016; Knüsel et al 2016; Osterholtz 2016). It is within this broad research background that the importance of the Sculptor's Cave archive can be fully realised. Before embarking on any detailed discussion, however, it is useful to give a sense of the Sculptor's Cave sequence as a whole and to explain what it might have meant in human terms.

### 8.2 The Sculptor's Cave: a speculative biography

Earlier chapters have examined the evidence from the Sculptor's Cave in great detail and interpretations have been advanced with caution and due consideration of alternative possibilities. In the midst of all the detail, however, it can be hard to discern the bigger picture. This section is, therefore, rather different. Here we provide a brief narrative – shorn of most of the earlier caveats – conveying what we *think* might have been happening at the Sculptor's Cave over these 14 or so centuries: a period of around 50 generations spanning the Late Bronze Age to the end of the Roman Iron Age. While based on detailed archaeological arguments, what follows is also the product of informed speculation and analogy.

The first visits to the Sculptor's Cave probably took place in the Early Bronze Age, although these were brief and episodic, leaving little trace beyond occasional discarded flints and some signs of burning in the sand that accumulated on the cave floor. While we know very little about the nature of this earliest activity, the treacherous access from both land and sea suggests that even these early visitors may have been drawn by spiritual or religious impulses rather than mundane practicality. Indeed, some of the neighbouring coastal caves were already being used for funerary activity at this time.

Later, during the Middle Bronze Age, a fall of material from the cliff above the Sculptor's Cave partly blocked its

entrance, trapping water in the interior. Over the next couple of centuries, most of this blocking material eroded away, allowing thin lenses of windblown sand to form in the entrance passages, which gradually dried out. By the Late Bronze Age (c 1000 BC), it became possible to walk along the dry passages and to look across the shallow, stagnant pool within the main body of the cave.

It is around this time that funerary activity in the Sculptor's Cave began. The deposition of a young goat in the East Passage may have served to mark this new chapter in the cave's life. Successive wooden structures in the West Passage served as screens to restrict access to the watery interior, or perhaps as racks for the display of the dead. Either way, these structures blocked the narrow passages, lowering the temperature inside so that one's breath crystallised in the air, even at the height of summer. The cold, the dark, the water, the silence and the presence of the dead made the cave an awe-inspiring place, eminently suitable for communion with the ancestors and the supernatural.

Over the course of a generation or so, the dead were brought into the cave. The bodies were mainly those of children who had already lain for a time elsewhere. Although the bodies had partially decayed – often missing parts of their hands and feet – they remained clothed or wrapped as mummy bundles. Some wore gold-covered rings in their hair that eventually dropped onto the cave floor, where they were absorbed into the accumulating deposits. At some point, someone gathered six of these hair rings together and, crossing the shallow pool of water, placed them carefully under a low overhang at the rear of the cave, perhaps as an offering to the spirits of the dead or perhaps simply for safekeeping. But other objects remained where they fell, either in the entrance passages or trampled into the damp ground at the edge of the pool, where the passages gave way to the main body of the cave.

Those young individuals whose bodies ended up in the cave were specially chosen for this purpose. Perhaps this was intended as a particular honour or perhaps these mummy bundles, decorated with gold and bronze finery, were seen rather as offerings to underworld deities. As liminal beings themselves, not yet fully socialised into adulthood, children were well-suited to mediate with the chthonic spirits. Other members of the community, by contrast, underwent funerary rites elsewhere that resulted in the ultimate disintegration and disappearance of their remains.

Once in the cave, the bodies were not forgotten. People often made the journey to this isolated coastline, across Loch Spynie, to tend to the dead, perhaps at particular, predetermined times of the year. Once the flesh had gone, some bones were polished clean and white; moved, grouped and rearranged. These visits were neither brief nor mournful. Visitors brought food to prepare and cook in the entrance passages and under the entrance canopy; perhaps these were special foods given to the ancestors (cf Hastorf 2003; Reddy 2015) or perhaps they were meals for the living visitors to the cave. Debris from the preparation of meals and fuel waste from fires began to accumulate, sometimes encasing and preserving stray bones fallen from the desiccated corpses. Rites were conducted to ensure the health, fertility and success of the community and to ensure the cooperation (or at

least prevent the enmity) of potentially dangerous underworld beings. Between each visit, the cave lay cold and silent, while the coastal winds blew in thin lenses of sand to lightly cover the debris left behind.

Nearby caves were similarly used. At one site, a few hundred metres to the west, stake-built structures were erected, meals were prepared and consumed, and the bodies of the dead (again, many of them children) were laid out. Perhaps each cave was the preserve of a separate community or kin-group, or perhaps bodies were moved from one cave to the next as the protracted funerary rites progressed.

By around 900 BC, it was no longer the custom to bring the dead to the Sculptor's Cave, or indeed to other caves along the Covesea coast. Nonetheless, people continued to visit: cooking, eating and drinking around the entrance area and within the passages. Memories of the cave's earlier funerary role remained: in the bones that lay scattered on the floor; in the rotting structures whose timbers decayed slowly in the cold, salty atmosphere; and in oral traditions retold in this ancient place.

Despite the social and economic changes that accompanied the end of the Bronze Age, the Sculptor's Cave remained a significant place for Iron Age communities. Between around 800 and 500 BC, a stone and turf structure was built under the entrance canopy, obstructing entry into the East Passage. At the outer end of the West Passage, a timber gate was erected to control access; an attempt perhaps to separate the living from the dead. At some point these structures were destroyed in a conflagration: a deliberate cleansing of the site or the accidental outcome of a cooking fire left to burn out of control? Following this episode of destruction, the gate at the outer end of the West Passage was rebuilt and a similar one established halfway along the East Passage. Now and again, informal paving was laid along the passages as they continued to accumulate debris from cooking fires and food preparation. As the centuries passed, however, visits to the cave declined in frequency and intensity, although occasional events (such as the burial of a dog in the West Passage) continued to mark the cave as a special place lying outside the realm of everyday life.

As in the Bronze Age, the Iron Age people who visited the Sculptor's Cave belonged to small-scale, autonomous communities. This changed markedly, however, during the early centuries AD. The first news of the Roman invasion of southern Britain would have reached the north-east through the movement of travellers, traders and perhaps even refugees. As the conquest progressed through the AD 40s–70s, Roman presence in the far south became an established reality, demonstrating a model of power and military strength on a scale not previously witnessed. It was with the Agricolan invasion in AD 79, however, that Iron Age communities in Scotland were forced to engage directly with the seemingly inexorable advance of the Roman army.

Although never part of the Roman province, the presence of such a powerful and threatening neighbour was a catalyst for social and political change in the region. Previously disparate Iron Age communities came together in significant numbers in AD 83 to oppose Agricola's army at Mons Graupius; the exact location of this encounter is not known but is thought to lie somewhere in north-east Scotland. War leaders were elected and alliances made between groups that previously had limited direct contact. In the

centuries that followed, intermittent conflicts and contacts with Rome (and the ever-present threat of conquest) created a new political and ethnic consciousness that led to the formation of larger, more hierarchical polities.

During these turbulent centuries, activity at the Sculptor's Cave intensified once more, with the renewal of votive and funerary activity. It may be that the cave, as an ancestral place for the dead, provided comfort to those seeking tangible links with the past in the face of this changing social landscape. Unlike before, however, the bodies brought to the cave were now primarily those of adults, though they still represented only a minority of the community's dead. These bodies had not been subject to previous mortuary rites, as the Late Bronze Age children had been, but were brought to the cave soon after death (wrapped or dressed), with small personal objects such as pins, necklaces and 'toilet instruments' of bone, bronze and silver. By now, the pool that had previously filled the cave had finally dried up, and the interior, rather than the entrance passages, became the focus of activity. As before, visitors came to the cave: cooking, eating and drinking among the remains of the dead, who were preserved for many years by the cold, salty sea air.

The unstable political conditions of this period led to extreme acts of violence between those groups competing for power. During the third century AD, six or more people – most of them adults – were led along the tortuous route to the cave. They entered the cave alive, where they were forced to their knees and, heads flexed onto their chests, systematically beheaded. Their decapitated corpses were left where they lay; the brutality of their fate legitimised by the sanctity of the cave and the presence of the ancestors.

Although visits were now sparse and irregular, this extraordinary event did not mark the end of the cave's use. A few generations later, a hoard of around 200 coins was placed in the cave interior: a mix of Roman originals and indigenous copies, left perhaps as an offering to the dead or to the underworld spirits. Then, as a final act of closure, a series of symbols was carved around the outer part of the entrance passages. Rather than any physical barrier, these images – redolent with meaning to those who saw them – sealed the cave off from the world of the living and marked its passage into memory; an epitaph perhaps to those who had been executed and whose stories lived on in oral tradition.

In the centuries that followed, the cave lay mostly undisturbed, though it was not entirely forgotten. Occasional visitors carved crosses around the entrance walls, perhaps as a warning to a newly Christian society to stay away from this dangerous pagan place. Of course, people did continue to visit, sometimes to hide contraband (if we believe the author of the 'curse' engraved on the east wall of the cave interior in the seventeenth century) and, in later centuries, to add their own names to the fabric and history of this enigmatic place.

### 8.3 Worlds apart: caves as liminal places

From the creation stories of the Aztecs to the epic poems of Ancient Greece, caves have always been associated with worlds apart: realms of the dead, the ancestors, the supernatural, the

'other'. Dowd (2015: 6) notes that the Irish word for cave, *uath*, can also mean fear, horror or terror, and that it is still sometimes used in reference to a grave. Although each cave represents a unique environment, there appear to be certain recurrent features among those associated with ritual or religious activity. Many such caves contain underground rivers or pools, forming the foci for votive deposition or sacrifice. Ritualised activity seems often to occur in particular 'threshold' areas, such as entrances, and in 'twilight zones' where light gives way to darkness. Some caves contain stone or timber structures associated with acts of ritual performance, including the control of movement and the ordering of space. Many yield human remains, often disarticulated and apparently processed in complex ways in the course of transformative secondary mortuary rites. These patterns hint at commonalities of cosmology and belief across wide areas and deep time.

It would be tempting to propose direct links between some of the more unusual finds from Scottish caves and the broader body of Eurasian mythology associated with the subterranean realm. Could the dog buried in the West Passage of the Sculptor's Cave, for example, have been regarded as a guardian of the entrance to the underworld, similar to the multi-headed Cerberus who features in Greek myth from at least as early as the eighth century BC (Evelyn-White 1964)? Does the extraordinary find of a wooden lyre bridge, dating to around the fourth century BC at High Pasture Cave in Skye (Birch and Wildgoose 2013: 82–4), reflect some northern avatar of Orpheus, who journeyed into the underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice and whose Greek origins extend to at least the sixth century BC (Lee 1996: 3–4)? There is of course no way to substantiate such specific links but, given the cross-cultural similarities in attitudes to caves and the underworld across Europe in later prehistory, it would perhaps not be too surprising if deep-rooted myths and cosmological ideas underlay similar practices across wide regions.

As we have seen in chapter 1, the recurrent association of caves with other realms owes much to their physical characteristics. Caves are voids in the earth, forming a tangible link between the above-ground world of the living and the below-ground world of chthonic spirits and deities. Coastal caves, like the Sculptor's Cave, embody a further layer of liminality, occupying a hinterland between land and sea. As such, they represent nodal points where worlds come together and break apart. This physical position, betwixt and between, makes them inherently liminal places (Turner 1969: 95), suitable for a range of activities involving communion with spirits and ancestors and transformation, for example, from one physical or spiritual state to another.

Just as caves are ruptures in the physical landscape, so death is a rupture in the social lives of communities. The dead body too is a liminal entity, undergoing the most fundamental of transformations from fleshed corpse to dry bone or ashes. Like any other rite of passage, death rituals across the world mark out this process as spiritually dangerous and requiring careful control (cf van Gennep 1960). This extends not only to the manner in which funerary rites should be conducted, but also to the places in which they might best be carried out. The liminality of caves makes them eminently appropriate places for the transformation of bodies and the journeying of spirits from one world to the next (cf Brück 1995: 260–1).

## 8.4 Experiencing the Sculptor's Cave

### 8.4.1 *The Sculptor's Cave as a physical space*

Although a product of entirely natural processes, the Sculptor's Cave is a dramatic, almost architectural, space with near-straight-sided walls and a monumental double entrance passage. Unlike the other caves along the Covesea coast, which are long, narrow and tunnel-like or else large, open and irregular, the Sculptor's Cave gives an erroneous but nonetheless compelling sense of having been intentionally hewn out of the rock; for the prehistoric communities who used it, it may well have been considered to have been fashioned by supernatural or mythical beings, who so often appear to inhabit such places in myth and folklore. All caves affect us, through their darkness, stillness and coolness, but the seeming artificiality of the Sculptor's Cave would have marked it out as special: as a dwelling, tomb or temple of ancestors, gods or spirits. It remains an eerie and powerful place.

### 8.4.2 *Space and movement*

Entering the Sculptor's Cave today is straightforward, at least once one has negotiated the tortuous journey along the coast. The entrance passages are tall enough to walk through unimpeded and the interior is open and relatively airy. The same would have been true in the Late Bronze Age, when the cave was first used for funerary rites. During the Roman Iron Age, access would have involved crossing over a mound of deposits which had accumulated under the entrance canopy, although there would still have been no need to crouch or crawl at any point. Despite this, the presence of stake-built structures in the Late Bronze Age and a combination of timber gateways and turf/stone structures in the Roman Iron Age would have served to control and restrict movement.

Activity in the cave interior during the Late Bronze Age and Pre-Roman Iron Age would have been heavily conditioned by the presence of the shallow internal pool. This would have greatly restricted access to the main body of the cave and resulted in a focus on the twin entrance passages. By the early centuries AD, however, the pool had gone and the cave interior would have appeared much more as it does today. Access to the interior would have made the cave amenable to larger gatherings of people, in contrast to earlier periods, though the need to traverse the narrow entrance passages would always have afforded the opportunity to arrange visitors, perhaps in order of precedence or seniority.

### 8.4.3 *Light*

Despite Sylvia Benton's declaration that 'the sun never touches it' (1931: 178), the Sculptor's Cave is not entirely dark. At certain times of day, the sun does penetrate into the entrance passages and, once one's eyes have adjusted to the gloom, it is possible to examine the interior without the need for artificial light. The nature of the entrance passages, however, is such that they are easily blocked, cutting off all light from the cave. The decrepit wooden door that currently blocks the West Passage, probably put in place at the end of Benton's excavations, effectively (despite several holes) blocks light from the West Passage, giving

some impression of the impact that even flimsy screens would have created. In fact, the structures erected across the entrance passages at various points in the cave's use are likely to have rendered the interior entirely dark and would have made visitors wholly dependent on artificial light. We can thus envisage the cave during the Late Bronze and Pre-Roman Iron Ages as illuminated by flickering torches reflecting off the shimmering surface of the internal pool and creating shifting shadows on the uneven walls.

### 8.4.4 *Temperature*

Caves generally maintain a cool, stable temperature relative to the outside world; the Sculptor's Cave today feels generally cooler than the outside in summer and rather less cold in winter. During digitisation work on the Pictish carvings in 2014 (box section 1), it became necessary to screen off the entrance passages with a black plastic sheet in order to create sufficiently dark conditions for the structured light scanner to operate at a reasonable level of efficiency. This was, albeit accidentally, highly instructive in relation to understanding the experiential qualities of temperature within the cave. Despite the thinness of the plastic membrane, blocking the entrance in this way substantially reduced the temperature inside the cave such that one's breath crystallised in the air, even on a mild and sunny spring day. Since the entrance passages seem to have been repeatedly blocked during prehistoric use of the cave, it is likely that similarly cold conditions would have pertained, elevating the perception of journeying between worlds.

### 8.4.5 *Fire and smoke*

The use of fire would have radically affected the experiential quantities of the cave. Hearths appear to have been common in all periods: numerous areas of burning were found in both entrance passages during the Shepherds' excavations and at least one well-built hearth of probable Roman Iron Age date was recorded within the cave interior by Benton (illus 2.4). Experimental work at Robin Hood's Cave, Creswell Crags, has shown (as we might expect) that lighting fires in caves can quickly choke their interiors with smoke, rendering them effectively unusable (or at the very least uncomfortable) for many hours (Gentles and Smithson 1986). Only when the fire has reduced to embers does this problem alleviate. No specific experimental work has been conducted at the Sculptor's Cave (a Scheduled Monument), and it might be suggested that the air flow between and around the distinctive twin entrance passages would have made smoke less of a problem here than in more cramped single-entrance caves. The situation would, however, have been very different when one or both entrance passages were closed off, in which case fires inside the cave may well have produced dense, choking smoke. One solution may have been to feed an internal hearth with embers drawn from a fire outside the cave; unless of course there were specific reasons for wanting a smoke-filled interior (see section 8.5.3). Whatever activities were happening inside, the control of air flow, manipulation of temperature and the management of fire must always have played an important role in the way in which the Sculptor's Cave was experienced and used.

## 8.4.6 Sound

The acoustic properties of caves can distort, accentuate or amplify sounds. Indeed, this phenomenon was recognised and exploited as early as the Upper Palaeolithic, where the resonant areas of certain caves were preferentially chosen over non-resonant areas for the creation of parietal art (eg Bahn 1997; Fazenda et al 2017). Although the interior of the Sculptor's Cave today acts to deaden sound (Rupert Till pers comm), the former presence of water in the interior would have created a very different acoustic environment. This suggests that the experience of sound within the cave, including any chanting, music, singing and dancing forming part of ritual performances, would have been very different for visitors in the Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age.

## 8.4.7 Smell

Caves serve to contain and amplify odours, and some underground activities may have been strongly associated with particular olfactory experiences. Indeed, they would have been an intrinsic aspect of certain ritual activities in caves, including funerary rites. Smells ranging from the nauseating odour of decomposing animal carcasses or human corpses to the dankness of damp earth and stagnant water, the pungency of animal faeces and the choking effect of thick smoke are all likely to have been experienced at various times by visitors to the Sculptor's Cave. These would have had the potential to evoke powerful memories and emotions, especially if visits to the cave involved communion with the spirit world or tending to the remains of the dead.

## 8.4.8 The cave through time

Drawing on this consideration of the experiential qualities of the Sculptor's Cave, it is possible to characterise two distinct and chronologically separate sets of physical conditions that visitors to the site would have encountered. In the earlier period (the Late Bronze Age and the Pre-Roman Iron Age), the cave would have been cold, dark and damp, with heat and light excluded by the timber structures at the entrance and the acoustics heightened by the presence of the internal pool. Activity would have mostly been constrained within the entrance passages, restricting the numbers of visitors entering the cave at any one time and necessitating that any large gatherings of people remained outside, under the entrance canopy. Fires appear to have been laid in the entrance area and passages, though smoke penetration to the cave interior may have been limited by the presence of the stake-built structures.

In the Roman Iron Age, the cave would have been dry, with an internal space capable of accommodating large numbers of people. Sound inside would have been deadened by the cave walls, as it is today, and the continued blocking of the entrance passages would have made for a dark, gloomy interior. During this period, fires were laid inside the main body of the cave. We cannot know whether these were lit with logs and branches, filling the cave with acrid smoke, or whether embers were taken from fires outside in order to mitigate against this; either

case would have altered the way in which the cave was experienced and would potentially have facilitated different forms of activity.

## 8.5 Caves and the dead

### 8.5.1 Late Bronze Age funerary rites

#### THE ELUSIVE DEAD

Funerary activity in later prehistoric Britain, from the Middle Bronze Age onwards, is generally elusive. Neither inhumation nor cremation seems to have been the dominant rite, although both were practised at certain times and places (Harding 2016). Even where inhumation is observed, however, it often takes unusual forms, as at Cliffs End Farm, Kent, where evidence for peri-mortem trauma, post-mortem manipulation and an atypical demographic pattern suggest this was not a normative rite (McKinley et al 2015). In the majority of cases, human remains are found as stray bones on domestic sites (eg Brück 1995; Armit and Ginn 2007; Armit 2017). These disarticulated fragments (often crania and long bones) were, in many cases, most likely recovered from bodies undergoing excarnation (ie defleshing either by natural or artificial means), whether through exposure to the elements or within a protected environment.

Like cremation, excarnation involves a very visible transformation of the body from one physical state to another; in this case, from fleshed articulated corpse to dry, white bones. If excarnation was widely practised during the second and first millennia BC, then the great majority of human remains would have been dispersed naturally (or perhaps deliberately) and would thus be invisible to us today. Despite the likely importance of this form of disposal of the dead at this time, primary (and likely ephemeral) excarnation sites have yet to be found, and the nature of these rites is almost entirely based on inference from the analysis of isolated bones found in secondary locations (cf Carr and Knüsel 1997; Armit 2012: 204–8).

A strong case has recently been made for other forms of mortuary practice in later prehistoric Britain. In particular, mummification seems to have played a much more important role than was previously understood. Although achievable naturally within certain favourable environments (eg desiccating or anaerobic conditions), mummification may also be promoted through interventions such as drying or smoking or through more invasive techniques such as the intentional removal of internal organs. In all cases, natural decay of the soft tissues is arrested, retaining the integrity of the body for an indefinite period. The first evidence of deliberate mummification in prehistoric Britain comes from the Late Bronze Age settlement of Cladh Hallan in South Uist, where several tightly contracted burials with evidence for post-mortem manipulation were placed beneath house floors (Parker Pearson et al 2005). One articulated 'individual' was demonstrated by radiocarbon dating and osteological analysis to be a composite of at least three people, who had probably died several centuries before being buried (ibid) at a period broadly contemporary with initial funerary activity at the Sculptor's Cave. Broader studies involving the histological analysis of bone from other Bronze Age 'burials' echo these findings (Booth et al 2015), suggesting

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a more widespread practice of depositing mummy bundles at this time.

### FUNERARY RITES AT THE SCULPTOR'S CAVE

It is within this broader context that we must consider the first flourish of funerary activity at the Sculptor's Cave, between around 990–935 *cal BC* to 955–920 *cal BC*. This activity, according to Bayesian modelling, may have lasted for only 1–35 years (68% probability) (section 4.5.2); in other words, a generation or less. Such a short chronology of mortuary activity presents a remarkable opportunity to examine funerary practices and beliefs that have left little archaeological trace elsewhere.

We have seen in chapter 6 that it is possible to disentangle the paper records of the now-vanished human remains from Sylvia Benton's work with at least a degree of confidence, made possible in part by the survival of the smaller assemblage from the Shepherds' excavations. Detailed analysis has shown that the Late Bronze Age bodies deposited in the cave were overwhelmingly (88%) those of children and infants. This is an unusual demographic for any prehistoric funerary assemblage; together, children and infants make up only 25% of unburnt human bones from settlement sites across Late Bronze Age Britain (Brück 1995: 249). These bodies seem to have been incomplete when they entered the cave, since some parts (notably the small bones of the hands and feet) were absent, perhaps the result of primary but incomplete

excarnation in protected environments off-site (illus 8.1). Nonetheless, the presence of gold-covered hair rings and other personal objects suggests that they were elaborately clothed or wrapped. The most likely interpretation is that they were brought to the cave as mummy bundles, which had been curated above ground for some time and had begun to disintegrate.

Once inside the cave, bodies appear to have been kept above ground (since there is no evidence for inhumation), perhaps stored or displayed on wooden racks represented by the stake-built structures in the West Passage. The location of the sub-adult mandibles and hair rings, for example, led Ian Shepherd to suggest that the heads of children were displayed in the entrance passages (2007: 199), decaying in situ as the soft tissue broke down and becoming incorporated into the floor deposits. Although subsequent recovery of numerous human post-cranial bones from the faunal assemblage casts doubt on this specific interpretation, it remains possible that some form of display in the entrance passages was practised.

Given that the few formal burials dated to the Late Bronze Age in Britain contain more than a few sherds of pottery (Brück 1995: 249, 260), the presence of valuable objects associated with the dead at the Sculptor's Cave is highly unusual. Late Bronze Age metalwork is frequently recovered from rivers and bogs, and occasionally also from caves, particularly those (as at Heathery Burn Cave, Co. Durham) which feature underground streams; as such,

the internal pool within the Sculptor's Cave may have tied it into wider Late Bronze Age traditions of depositing votive objects in watery places. Significantly, however, the Late Bronze Age metalwork from the Sculptor's Cave comprises exclusively personal ornaments (penannular bracelets, pins and gold-covered hair rings); the weaponry and tools that are frequently included in other contemporary cave hoards (eg Heathery Burn Cave (noted above); and at Kilgreany Cave and Brother's Cave, Co. Waterford and Kilmurry Cave, Co. Kerry, Ireland) are absent. Rather than representing a conventional 'hoard' then, the Late Bronze Age metalwork at the Sculptor's Cave appears more likely to have accompanied and adorned the dead. The fact that such valuable items were left, apparently undisturbed, is testament to the taboos that must have surrounded removal of the ritually charged material that entered these enigmatic places (cf Dowd 2015: 147).

The unusual treatment of the dead at the Sculptor's Cave and their atypical demographic composition raise the question of whether we should really understand the cave as a funerary site at all. Perhaps, instead, we should regard these bodies as offerings to the underworld gods or spirits? Children are often regarded as especially appropriate for

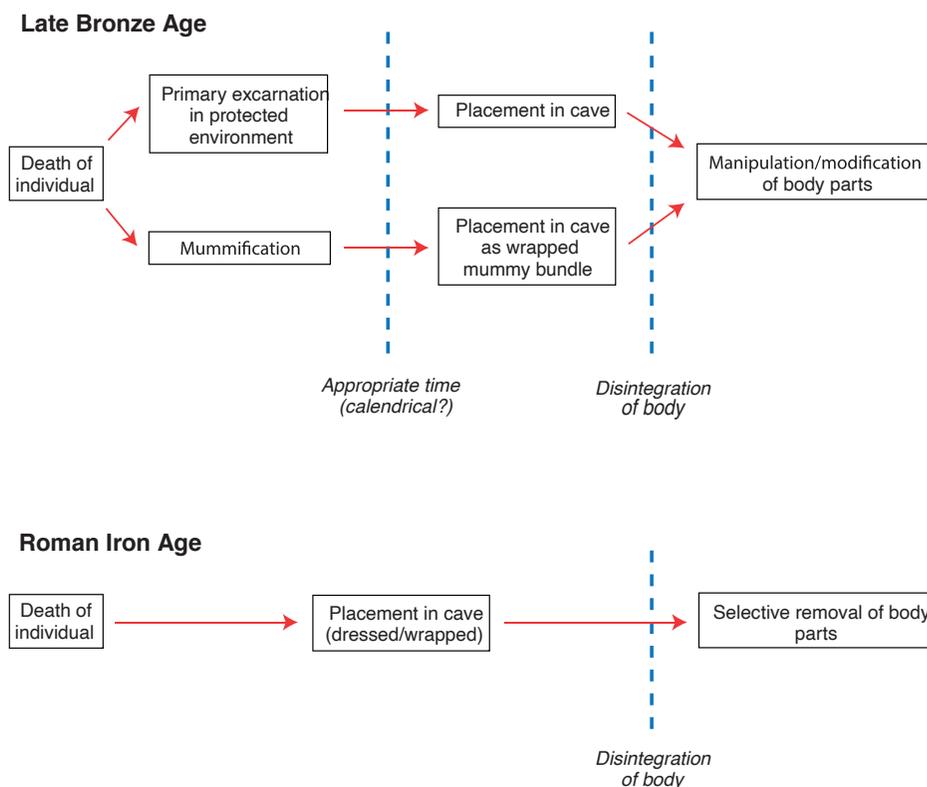


Illustration 8.1

Possible mortuary pathways for the Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age human bone assemblages at the Sculptor's Cave

sacrifice (eg Wilson et al 2013) and it may be that the Late Bronze Age communities of north-east Scotland were prepared to offer up their own offspring to appease their deities. Despite some limited evidence for peri-mortem trauma (see section 6.8.2), however, there is little to suggest that these individuals had been deliberately killed (although numerous modes of execution, such as strangling, poisoning etc, would of course be impossible to detect in most archaeological contexts). Nonetheless, it may be that children who had died of natural causes were still regarded as socially liminal and thus appropriate mediators with the spirit world.

#### PRESERVATION OR DISSOLUTION: A QUESTION OF INTENT?

Excarnation and mummification would appear to represent polar opposites in the treatment of the dead. The first aims to achieve complete disintegration of the body, while the second promotes its preservation. It is difficult from the evidence available here, however, to distinguish the intent behind the placing of bodies into the Sculptor's Cave.

Given the under-representation of small bones of the hands and feet, it seems unlikely that the Sculptor's Cave was a *primary* excarnation site during the Late Bronze Age. It is, however, possible that the bones belonged to individuals who had been transported – while the body was still substantially intact – from a primary excarnation site located elsewhere for *secondary* excarnation in the cave. The lack of evidence for gnawing or weathering suggests that, if this were the case, the period of primary excarnation must have been conducted in a protected environment, such as mortuary house or container of some kind. Indeed, given that the AMS dates for the human remains are not significantly different from those of the animal bones in the same contexts, the period of primary excarnation (ie between the death of these individuals and their secondary deposition in the cave) is unlikely to have been more than a few years.

Equally, if the bodies had been mummified, either naturally or artificially, then they must also have been curated at some other location for an extended period (illus 8.1), where they fell into a degree of disrepair before being brought to the cave. In neither case (mummification or excarnation) can the cave be seen in isolation: the complex and protracted funerary rites of these Late Bronze Age individuals must have involved multiple locations.

Certain aspects of the environment within the Sculptor's Cave might lend weight to the idea that bodies were brought here to be preserved as wrapped or dressed mummy bundles. The salty atmosphere and cool, stable temperature of the cave interior, for example, generates preservative qualities that cannot have gone unnoticed in prehistory. These are perhaps best demonstrated by Benton's recovery of plaited human hair (1931: 207) and the survival of uncarbonised wood in some of the Late Bronze Age stakeholes excavated by the Shepherds (see section 2.3.3). This phenomenon is even more evident in Covesea Cave 2, 100m to the west, which yielded human soft tissue dating to the Late Bronze Age (Büster and Armit 2016). In the case of the Sculptor's Cave, organic preservation may have been further enhanced (intentionally or unintentionally) in the colder temperatures created by the timber screens or racks that blocked the entrance passages and on which bodies may have been placed.

Against this, however, we should remember that the presence of standing water in the cave during the Late Bronze Age would have created a much damper environment than is the case today, which may have counteracted the preservative qualities discussed above. There are also some indications that human remains may have been processed in such a way as to hasten their transition from fleshed bodies to clean, white bone, perhaps suggesting that excarnation was the primary intent. The clearest evidence for this comes from the multiple striations on a sub-adult frontal (SF231; see section 6.8.2), which seem to result from the vigorous cleaning or polishing of the cranium, perhaps to remove the last vestiges of the flesh. It may be, as has been suggested for Neolithic chambered tombs in Orkney, that the manual disarticulation of bodies within this sacred space reflected the need for the living to impose control and order over the transformative process of death in those individuals 'for whom the decay process had not concluded within a prescribed timeframe' (Crozier 2016: 732–3). The breakage patterns of some of the copper alloy bracelets (eg SF731a–c/SF796; illus 5.33) likewise suggest deliberate fragmentation.

On balance, and particularly given the likelihood that the dead were wrapped or clothed, the deposition of mummies or mummy bundles (with the intention of continued preservation) seems the most likely explanation for the human remains found in the Sculptor's Cave during the Late Bronze Age. Nonetheless, we cannot completely rule out the idea that the cave was used for secondary excarnation rites. The micro-environment of the cave during this period was not apparently ideal for either practice, and it appears that practical considerations were most likely overridden by the religious and/or symbolic significance of the cave itself: its liminal status and its facilitation of communication with the ancestors and the otherworld.

#### PARALLELS IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND

Late Bronze Age human remains have been recovered from several other Scottish caves. The most striking parallel is Covesea Cave 2 in the bay immediately west of the Sculptor's Cave (illus 1.1, 1.3; Büster and Armit 2016). While the nature of activity has yet to be fully explored and much of the extant material was collected during amateur excavations in the 1960s without any stratigraphic control (ibid), Late Bronze Age human remains from this cave are broadly contemporary with those from the Sculptor's Cave and, likewise, appear to be associated with curving, stake-built structures, hearth debris and faunal remains. More remarkably, the cave also yielded human bones dating to the Early Bronze Age (ie substantially pre-dating the evidence from the Sculptor's Cave), as did Cave 1 immediately to the east (illus 1.1, 1.3). Unfortunately, nothing is known of the original depositional context of these remains, since they are represented by unstratified material at Cave 1 and material redeposited in Late Bronze Age contexts in Cave 2. Further work in these (and other) caves along this stretch of coastline will undoubtedly help us to understand the place of the Sculptor's Cave within this broader funerary landscape.

Outside the immediate area, another potential parallel comes from Borness Cave in Kirkcudbrightshire, south-west Scotland (Corrie et al 1874; Clarke 1875; 1878). Although the bulk of the antiquarian finds from this site date to the Roman Iron Age, one of two infant crania found in the cave has recently yielded an AMS

date of 1006–844 cal BC at 95.4% probability (SUERC-61320; Sheridan et al 2015), making it more or less directly contemporary with human remains from the Sculptor's Cave. Late Bronze Age activity is also known from Croig Cave, Mull, where an amber bead and a bracelet similar to those found at the Sculptor's Cave have recently been excavated (Mithen and Wicks 2012). As yet, however, there is no indication of human remains at this site.

Another potential parallel comes from the small, east-facing sea cave known as St Baldred's Cave in East Lothian, which was cleared out during the course of 'ornamental improvements' in 1831 (Sligo 1857: 353). Within the cave were deposits (some two feet thick) containing 'quantities of charcoal and the bones of animals, mixed with marine shell' overlying a carefully laid area of paving 'where it is supposed that the Priests offered up their prayers during the sacrifice' (ibid: 355–6, 361; illus 8.2). The focal point of activity was a large natural stone 'altar', artificially propped up in the entrance area, under and adjacent to which were the remains of two infants. Other unspecified human remains are also mentioned in relation to general deposits above the paving (ibid: 355–6). Associated pottery is poorly described but may suggest a later prehistoric date.

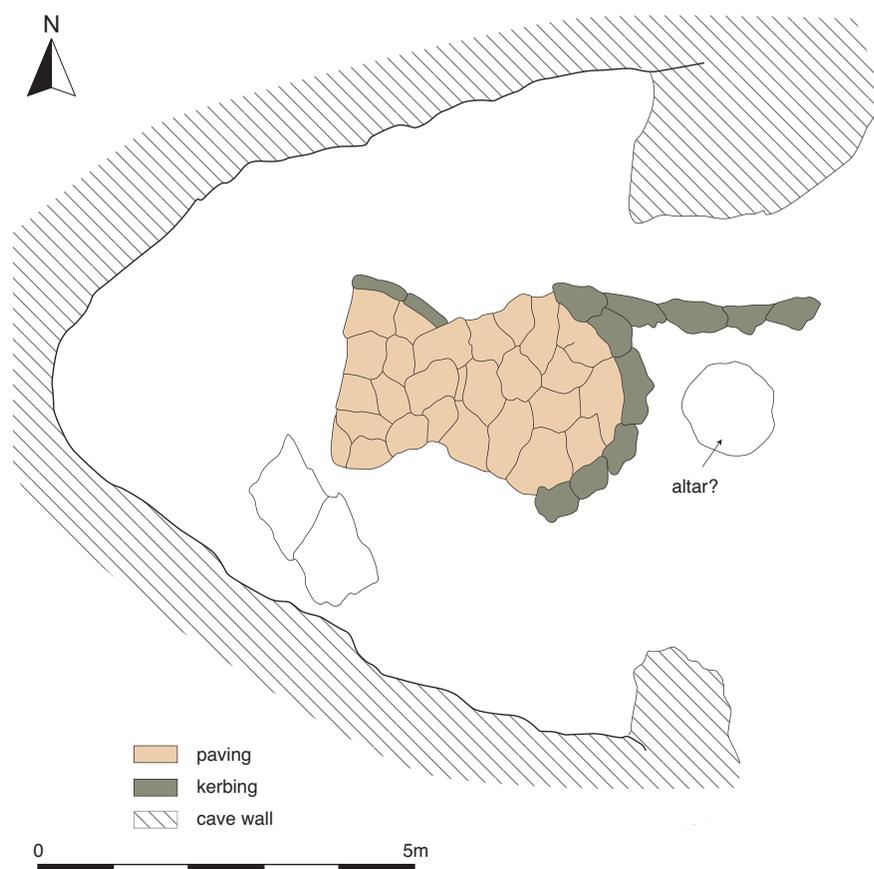


Illustration 8.2

Plan of the excavated structures at St Baldred's Cave, East Lothian, based on antiquarian excavations (after Sligo 1857: 361). Despite the inevitably crude nature of the excavation, George Sligo's detailed ground plan and verbal description gives us some confidence that the remains shown relate to prehistoric use of the cave

Further afield, Raven Scar Cave in the Yorkshire Dales has produced evidence for 15 individuals, including 10 juveniles (Leach 2006a: 103). The prevalence of mandibles and isolated teeth has led Leach (2006b: 415) to suggest that heads may have been placed within the cave and subsequently removed following a period of decomposition. Two radiocarbon dates suggest deposition of these remains in the tenth century BC (Leach 2006a: 113), contemporary with the period of Late Bronze Age funerary activity at the Sculptor's Cave.

Other English cave sites have also yielded human remains. The large cave at Heathery Burn, for example, included at least one articulated individual (Greenwell 1894: 96) and was associated (as noted above) with a rich assemblage of Late Bronze Age metalwork dating to around 900 BC (Britton and Longworth 1968; Britton 1971), together with animal bones, pottery, spreads of charcoal and fire-reddened hearths (Greenwell 1894). Meanwhile, Late Bronze Age and/or Early Iron Age material from Merlin's Cave, Herefordshire, included at least five adults and a child (Phillips 1931: 14), though it is not possible to ascertain from the original report whether or not these bones represented articulated skeletons or disarticulated elements. Finally, at Guy's Rift, Wiltshire, the remains of at least four adults and three children are reported in association with Early Iron Age pottery (Hewer 1925: 231). Though these assemblages offer interesting parallels, the frequent uncertainty of stratigraphy and chronology deriving from their antiquarian, amateur or otherwise problematic excavation histories makes any detailed comparisons with the evidence from the Sculptor's Cave difficult.

Recent syntheses of the archaeological evidence from Irish caves provide further evidence for Late Bronze Age activity, including the deposition of human remains (Dowd 2015; 2016). Dowd notes that, in contrast to the prevalence of cremation as the normative funerary rite in Bronze Age Ireland, human bones from caves are almost always unburnt (2015: 160). This might suggest a more complex role for the individuals deposited in these locations: perhaps they were mediators with the underworld, who, preserved in the liminal zone between life and death, were not permitted the transformative rites of cremation necessary to transport their souls fully to the next world. Among the closest parallels for the Sculptor's Cave is Glencurran Cave, Co. Clare, where Middle/Late Bronze Age disarticulated human bones and the (probable) articulated remains of a young child were associated with slight, stone-built structures (ibid: 149).

The association of human remains with caves in this period is by no means solely an insular phenomenon. Harding's synthesis of the European Bronze Age



Illustration 8.3  
Possible cairn on the cliff top around 600m west of the Sculptor's Cave (Canmore ID 16281)

proposes 'a special role for caves and rock-clefts in Bronze Age religion' (2000: 320; although he also notes what he believes to be evidence for domestic occupation in many caves). Notable concentrations of Late Bronze Age cave deposits in Greece, Italy, Germany, southern France and in the karstic regions of Slovenia and Croatia (ibid: 317–20) often include both funerary activity and the deposition of votive objects. The specific characteristics of such cave use across Europe are of course highly variable, but broad parallels with activity at the Sculptor's Cave are nonetheless evident. Bezdanjača Cave, in the Lika region of Croatia, for example, is accessible only by scaling a cliff face, yet it contained the remains of around 200 individuals laid out singly and in groups in natural niches formed by limestone concretions on the cave floor (Malinar 1998). These individuals, dating to the Middle/Late Bronze Age, had apparently been deposited as intact bodies and had been decorated with red ochre. Around them were the remains of numerous hearths, broken pottery and animal bones (ibid), suggesting, as at the Sculptor's Cave, repeated visits by the living to the dead.

Other striking parallels are found at the Trou de Han in the Belgian Ardennes, memorably described by its excavator, Eugène Warmenbol (1996), as 'La Bouche des Enfers' ('the Mouth of Hell'). During the Late Bronze Age, the underground River Lesse, which flows through the cave, seems to have been a focus for the deposition of fine metalwork (including weaponry which, as we have seen, is absent from the Sculptor's Cave) and other objects, including human remains (Warmenbol 2007). In an area known as La Galerie de la Grande Fontaine, the bones of four children and an adolescent were found commingled with pot sherds and food remains, while an unstratified human cranium from La Galerie Belgo-Romaine was also found to date to the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age (ibid).

#### THE WIDER LATE BRONZE AGE LANDSCAPE

Little is known of Late Bronze Age activity in the landscape surrounding the Sculptor's Cave. Aside from the broadly

contemporary funerary activity recently identified at nearby Covesea Cave 2 (Büster and Armit 2016), there are records of two possible cairns on the cliff tops close by (Canmore ID 16281 and 16282; illus 8.3), although their date is unknown. There are a few other examples on the north side of the former Loch Spynie, including poorly understood and undated examples excavated in the nineteenth century at Iverugie (Canmore ID 16142) and Hopeman (Canmore ID 16154), c 2.5km and 3.5km respectively from the Sculptor's Cave. Although conventionally dated to the Early Bronze Age, recent excavations of burial mounds in north-east Scotland have shown that their chronologies can extend much later than originally supposed, even into the early centuries of the first millennium BC (eg Bradley 2000; 2005). It is not impossible, therefore, that these nearby monuments were associated in some way with the mortuary rites practised at the Covesea Caves, though they may of course represent earlier burial monuments with no formal connection to funerary activity at the Sculptor's Cave.

It is similarly impossible at present to determine where the communities using the Sculptor's Cave might have lived. A gold-covered hair ring from Clarkly Hill (see section 5.7.1) and a bronze spearhead from Burghead (Anon 1890), around 5km and 6km from the Sculptor's Cave respectively (illus 1.8), suggest that these two long-lived sites may have been occupied at this time. Late Bronze Age clay moulds have also been recovered from the settlement of Birnie (Hunter in prep), some 12km south of the Sculptor's Cave. Otherwise, the settlement landscape of the period is largely unknown.

#### 8.5.2 The decapitation 'event'

Despite ongoing activity at the Sculptor's Cave during the Iron Age, more than a millennium passed before it resumed its role as a place for deposition of the dead. The nature of this renewed mortuary activity – most likely centred on the second and third

## DARKNESS VISIBLE

centuries AD – differed markedly however from the mortuary rites practised during the Late Bronze Age.

The human bones dating to the Roman Iron Age divide broadly into two groups: the first suggests renewed use of the cave for complex post-mortem funerary rites, while the second appears to represent a specific decapitation ‘event’. This latter assemblage comprises seven cervical vertebrae (the only human bones retained by Sylvia Benton), six of which show evidence for decapitation in the form of cut marks from a heavy bladed weapon, most likely an iron sword. Taking additional archive records into account, as many as nine individuals (including two sub-adults) may have been put to death in this way. Some of the vertebrae were cut clean through with a single stroke, while one (CV5) bears evidence of at least 11 blows. Based on both Bayesian modelling of the AMS dates and the remarkable consistency of the injuries, these bones can be taken to suggest a single violent episode dating to AD 220–335.

It seems unlikely that the cervical vertebrae were derived from trophy heads obtained through warfare or raiding (cf Armit 2012): blade injuries are found on both the upper and lower portions of the vertebrae (section 6.8.3), indicating the presence both of bones that would have remained attached to the victim’s body (eg CV3 and CV6) and others that would have stayed with the severed head (eg CV1 and CV2). If these individuals had been beheaded on the battlefield, it seems highly improbable that their entire (headless) bodies would have been transported to the cave together with their severed heads. Instead, it seems much more likely that these individuals were killed in the cave itself. As we have seen, the cave interior had dried out by this period and would have been able to accommodate a substantial gathering; the victims themselves, their executioners, guards and, potentially, a crowd of onlookers.

Simply transporting six or more (presumably unwilling) individuals to the cave would have been a significant undertaking. They must presumably have been incapacitated by ropes or chains, or else closely monitored by armed guards. Arriving by land would have required marching them along the rocky shore at low tide, while arriving by sea in light boats at high tide would have been a hazardous venture even in fine weather. The angle and location of the cut marks on the vertebrae suggest that, once inside the cave, each victim was killed in a similar and systematic way: by an assailant standing behind them, most likely while they knelt with their heads flexed onto their chests. As such, they were almost certainly restrained, suggesting that multiple individuals were implicated in their death and that the victims were executed – perhaps ritualistically – as part of a premeditated, carefully staged event.

### WHO WERE THE VICTIMS?

Given the long association of the Sculptor’s Cave with the dead (and the difficulties of access), it is probable that the decapitations were conducted in this specific location so as to be sanctioned in some way by underworld gods, spirits or ancestors. If we work on the assumption that the decapitations relate to a single event, then it is unlikely that the individuals were criminals, outcasts or sacrificial victims; if this were the case, we might expect them to have been deposited in the cave over a more protracted period of time. The stable isotope evidence (section 6.9) suggests that the decapitated individuals form a homogenous group with a similar dietary signal to the Late Bronze Age individuals from the cave. This would seem to exclude certain potential interpretations; they were evidently not, for example, Roman soldiers, who would be expected to provide a more diverse set of isotopic results. Although it cannot be proven, the isotope evidence currently available is certainly consistent with a group of relatively local individuals. Given the scale of the decapitation event and the turbulent social conditions at this time, a political motivation for the killings is worth considering.

This period saw the coalescence of Iron Age tribes north of the frontier into increasingly large-scale confederacies in the face of Roman expansionism (Armit 2016: 151) and, as their military strength and confidence grew, it became possible for these groups to take the initiative against their southern neighbours. Ultimately, the conflict and instability of this period led to the emergence of the Picts, first mentioned in a panegyric (or eulogy) written by Eumenius in AD 297 (Wainwright 1955: 2). While a unified Pictish kingdom may not have arisen until several centuries later

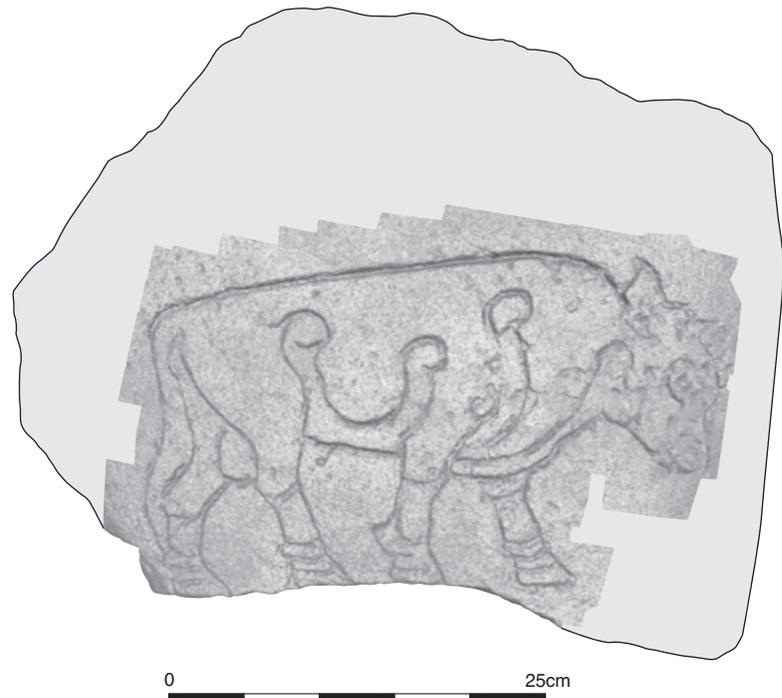


Illustration 8.4

Structured light scan of a bull symbol from the Pictish stronghold at Burghead, now held in Elgin Museum (courtesy Fragmented Heritage, University of Bradford)

(Fraser 2009), the Late Roman Iron Age is nonetheless likely to have seen competition between emerging elites.

The area around the Sculptor's Cave was central to these social changes. Indeed, the region centred on the Moray Firth has been identified with Fortriu, which was to become dominant in the early medieval Pictish kingdom (Woolf 2006). The coastal promontory (and later royal centre) at Burghead, c 6km west of the Sculptor's Cave (illus 1.8), was fortified between the fourth and sixth centuries AD (Harding 2004: 248; illus 8.4), making it a strong candidate for the major power centre of the early Pictish kingdom. It seems quite likely, therefore, that the area around the Sculptor's Cave saw factional conflicts during the third century AD and later, as competing groups jostled for power.

Is it possible then that the decapitations at the Sculptor's Cave represent politically motivated killings: the removal of a defeated lineage perhaps? In such a context, the perceived sanctity of the cave – and its association with the ancestors – may have been highly attractive to victors seeking to legitimise their rise to power.

#### PARALLELS IN SCOTLAND AND BEYOND

Decapitation was not uncommon in Iron Age Europe. Indeed, the 'ancient Celts' have often been thought to have venerated the human head: both those of their ancestors and trophy heads taken from enemies (eg Lambrechts 1954; Ross 1967). Although the primary evidence for this idea was derived from the classical literature, severed human heads are depicted widely in Iron Age iconography and osteological evidence for decapitation can be found on innumerable archaeological sites across the Continent (see Armit 2012). One particularly well known deposit from the Gaulish sanctuary of Ribemont-sur-Ancre in Picardy, for example, yielded the decapitated remains of around 500 adult males, thought to have been executed war prisoners displayed as part of a grisly post-battle trophy (Brunaux 2006: 107).

While the idea of a Europe-wide 'Celtic cult of the head' can no longer be supported by the available evidence, it is nonetheless clear that Iron Age communities in many parts of Europe regarded the human head as cosmologically significant and manifested this belief in a range of different ways (Armit 2012). In relation to caves specifically, a group of seven human mandibles, with characteristic cut marks on the ascending rami (indicative of decapitation from behind with a heavy bladed weapon), were deposited under a hearth at the Trou de Han in Belgium (Mariën 1975: 257–9; Warmenbol 2013: 93–5); a site that, as we have seen (section 8.5.1), also yielded evidence for the deposition of Late Bronze Age human remains. These mandibles appear to represent the remains of curated heads dating from the second century BC to the first century AD, at which point they seem to have been deposited en masse (Armit 2012: 127).

In Iron Age Britain, decapitated human heads seem also to have been displayed at the entrances to hillforts, as at Stanwick in North Yorkshire (Haselgrove 2016) and Broxmouth in East Lothian (Armit 2017: 166), while the deposition of human remains – particularly crania and long bones – is a recurrent feature of settlement sites more generally (eg Armit and Ginn 2007; Armit 2012). A specific interest in heads in Iron Age cave contexts is reflected by the occurrence of perforated cranial fragments at a range of sites. Scottish examples include a cranial

fragment, dating to cal AD 70–240, found close to a hearth at the inaccessible rock shelter of Fiskavaig on Skye (Birch 2010) and a modified cranium at MacArthur Cave, Oban (Shapland and Armit 2012).

Within the Roman province, the early centuries AD saw the appearance of decapitated individuals in what appear to be otherwise normative inhumation graves. More than 500 such burials have been documented from more than 200 Romano-British sites, representing males, females and a small proportion of sub-adults (Tucker 2013: 213–15). In most cases, the head (cranium, mandible and upper cervical vertebrae) appears to have been removed post-mortem, often from the front (eg Boylston et al 2000), and placed in the grave along with the body and any accompanying grave goods. More relevant to the Sculptor's Cave material, however, are 45 predominantly young adult males from Driffeld Terrace, York, dating from the late second to early third centuries AD, all of whom had been decapitated from behind (Montgomery et al 2011). Their prominent burial location, on a main road leading into the Roman town, has led to the suggestion that they might represent high-status individuals, executed perhaps during one of the 'pogrom-like killings' documented under the Severan dynasty (ibid: 169). Indeed, beheading appears to have been employed in the Roman world more generally as a form of execution for those of high status (eg Hope 2000: 112). It is not inconceivable, given the demonstrable contacts between the communities of north-east Scotland and the Roman province at this time, that the decapitations at the Sculptor's Cave were influenced by Roman practice; as at Driffeld Terrace, they may have represented the violent and ritualised removal of a problematic elite group.

Although not involving decapitation, it is also worth drawing attention to the young adult male found in Learnie Cave 2B, across the Moray Firth from Covesea, near Rosemarkie, on the south shore of the Black Isle. This individual, who displayed substantial peri-mortem cranial trauma, suggestive of deliberate overkill, appears to have been buried under boulders and a thin layer of sand in a recess of the cave associated with iron-working debris (Birch et al 2018). Although he met his death during the early medieval period, around cal AD 430–630, the violent treatment meted out (and the idiosyncrasies of his deposition) suggests a ritualised execution evocative of the earlier killings at the Sculptor's Cave.

#### 8.5.3 Roman Iron Age funerary activity

WAS THERE ROMAN IRON AGE FUNERARY ACTIVITY IN THE CAVE? Given Benton's interest in the cut-marked vertebrae from the Sculptor's Cave, it seems likely that any other human bones with obvious evidence for peri-mortem trauma would also have been retained or at least noted in the bone lists compiled by the osteologists at the time. Since widespread peri-mortem trauma is absent in the archival records, we might thus assume that the bulk of the assemblage did not display such evidence. We should note, however, that a Roman Iron Age tibia fragment (SF1100; recovered in 2006 from Benton's spoil heap) displays a possible peri-mortem spiral fracture (see section 6.8.3) and that subtle evidence for traumatic injury would most likely not have been recognised during cursory examination in the 1920s and 1930s. It

is impossible, therefore, to determine the extent to which violence played a part in the deaths of other individuals deposited in the cave during this period.

This raises an important question concerning the relationship between the decapitated individuals and the remainder of the Roman Iron Age human bone assemblage. Assuming that the decapitations relate to a single event – based on the similarities in the nature of the injuries and the consistency of the AMS dates – there are two main possibilities:

1. That all of the Roman Iron Age human remains from the Sculptor's Cave derive from a single violent event, of which the decapitations are the most obvious indicators.
2. That the decapitation event is distinct from ongoing use of the cave for mortuary activities over an extended period of the Roman Iron Age.

Although the first scenario is not impossible, there are two principal reasons for rejecting it. First, the MNI for the Roman Iron Age human remains assemblages (see section 6.10.3) is 22; even allowing for numerous caveats, this is significantly in excess of the six individuals represented by the surviving cut-marked vertebrae. If we were to suggest that the Roman Iron Age remains derive entirely from a single violent episode, we would thus have to invoke a massacre on a truly grand scale. Second, the artefacts deposited in the cave during the Roman Iron Age cover an extended chronological period (from at least the second to the fourth centuries AD). Although the deposition of these small personal items may be unconnected with the deposition of human bodies in the cave, it seems more parsimonious to assume that the two go together. While we cannot definitively resolve the issue, therefore, it seems more likely that the decapitation event was distinct from a broader Roman Iron Age tradition of funerary activity in the cave.

#### FUNERARY ACTIVITY AT THE SCULPTOR'S CAVE DURING THE ROMAN IRON AGE

In contrast to the Late Bronze Age, deposition of the dead at the Sculptor's Cave during the Roman Iron Age no longer favoured juveniles. Indeed, most of the individuals from this period appear to have been adults (based on extrapolation from the AMS dated elements; see section 6.5), though it is impossible, in the absence of the majority of the bone assemblage, to give any more detailed assessment of the age categories present or the balance between males and females. Again, in contrast to the Late Bronze Age, the proportions of various skeletal elements among the Roman Iron Age assemblage – including a high preponderance of the small bones of the hands and feet – suggest that bodies entered the cave intact (illus 8.1); that is, they had not been subject to any previous mortuary rite (eg exhumation off-site). Indeed, individuals may have been placed in the cave soon after death.

The apparent association of human remains with numerous items of personal jewellery and dress fasteners (including amber and glass beads, copper alloy projecting ring-headed pins, bracelets and belt fittings) suggests that the dead may have been laid out in their finest clothes; furthermore, some objects, including a silver projecting ring-headed pin, hint at the presence of high-status individuals. Other personal items, such as toilet

instruments (including silver tweezers), also appear to have accompanied the dead. Whether these represent personal belongings of the deceased or objects used in post-mortem care, their close association with the bodies of the dead suggests that their reuse in the world of the living was inappropriate.

The specific characteristics of the cave environment appear to have promoted preservation of the bodies, with elements such as vertebrae, sterna and clavicles being proportionately better represented than bodies in conventional Roman-period inhumation cemeteries (see section 6.10.3). Exposed within the enclosed cave interior, the gated entrances offered the bodies protection from scavengers and from the damaging effects of the elements. The cool, dry, salty environment created would have helped arrest bacterial activity and desiccate the bodies, while smoke from the fires may have promoted mummification, particularly when the entrance passages were blocked. Indeed, exposure to smoke has been suggested as one of the primary methods by which the mummification of human remains was achieved in later prehistoric Britain (Booth et al 2015: 1165–6), and the naturally enclosed spaces provided by caves (particularly those with narrow entrances which could be easily sealed) would have made them ideal funerary 'smokehouses'.

While the conditions inside the cave would have led to the preservation of bodies, it is again unclear whether this was the explicit intention or simply an unintended consequence of depositing the dead in this specific subterranean environment. Whichever was the case, it appears that bodies ultimately disarticulated to the point where certain elements – notably crania and long bones (which are substantially under-represented in the documented assemblage; section 6.10.3) – could be retrieved and removed from the cave (illus 8.1). These are precisely the elements most frequently encountered as disarticulated bones on later prehistoric settlements (eg Brück 1995; Armit and Ginn 2007; Armit 2017), where they were presumably used in ritual activities prior to their ultimate deposition or disintegration. If this was the case, then body parts recovered from the cave may have been regarded as particularly spiritually charged.

One further possible factor in the preservation of the bodies is worth noting here. Among the most unusual finds from the Sculptor's Cave were two fragments of orpiment (literally 'gold paint'), a distinctive yellow mineral (Schafer 1955: 73; section 5.12); these derive from Sylvia Benton's excavations and are thus effectively unstratified. While this material may have been used as pigment, perhaps to colour the Pictish carvings, it is equally possible that it derives from the bodies themselves. Orpiment contains arsenic trioxide and was known in the ancient world for its toxicity, with some accounts suggesting, for example, that it was Nero's preferred method for eliminating political rivals (Parascandola 2012: 5). Although the nearest documented sources of orpiment are in Powys, Wales and Co. Galway, Ireland (Hudson Institute of Mineralogy nd), the substance was imported from Asia Minor for use as pigment during the medieval period (Schafer 1955: 75) and may thus have arrived at the Sculptor's Cave through trade links with the Roman world.

Despite its toxicity, orpiment has been ingested for various purposes in many different cultures. In traditional Indian medicine the substance was 'regarded as having apotropaic qualities', being prescribed to thwart 'the unwholesome influences

of ghosts and demons' (Schafer 1955: 75). Small regular doses were consumed in parts of central Europe from the late medieval period into the early twentieth century 'to improve skin quality, promote sexual vigour, bestow energy and endurance, and facilitate breathing at high altitude' (Walton 2016). In early Taoist tradition, the ingestion of orpiment was believed to generate 'a notable increase in sexual energy and in aesthetic sensitivity, which might even lead to the point of hallucination' (Schipper 1994: 180). As a relatively rare and prized mineral, orpiment also features among grave goods in the Early Formative period (c 800–200 BC) cemetery of Chorrillos, Chile (Ogalde et al 2014). Remarkably, perhaps, it can still be purchased online through certain New Age websites as a drug for 'igniting your inner power' (Sage Goddess nd).

In the funerary context of the Sculptor's Cave, it is worth noting that ingesting orpiment before death appears to have a preservative effect on the body. As Schipper (1994: 180) notes in relation to Taoist tradition, 'the lifelike appearance of the corpse, with its supple skin and ruddy complexion, created an illusion of physical immortality'. While we cannot know the precise reasons why this unusual, exotic and highly toxic mineral was brought to the cave, it is certainly possible that it had been consumed by those subsequently interred there.

#### VOTIVE DEPOSITION

Even at the height of the Empire, Moray lay well beyond the limits of direct Roman military control. Nonetheless, the occurrence of Roman material in the region suggests that elite groups may have received periodic bribes to help keep the peace (Hunter 2007b: 24). A prime example comes from the settlement of Birnie, some 14km distant from the Sculptor's Cave, where two Roman coin hoards were deposited towards the end of the second century AD (ibid: 30). Some of the objects that ended up as votive deposits within the Sculptor's Cave may likewise have entered the region in this way, as part of Roman 'bribe-wealth', or else as items obtained by individuals through trade or raiding in the Roman province.

What is particularly remarkable about the Sculptor's Cave, however, is the occurrence of so many objects dating to the late third and fourth centuries AD; indeed, the cave is the only site in north-east Scotland to contain appreciable quantities of Late Roman material (Hunter 2007b: 32–4). Most notable among these is a hoard of around 240 coins comprising mainly native copies of Roman originals, deposited sometime after AD 364 (see section 5.7.3). This is a remarkable find, many miles north of any comparable examples. In the absence of a monetary economy in the region at this time, the coins would have been perceived rather differently here than they were in the Roman province. Several were pierced, possibly having been worn as charms or marks of status. The occurrence of so many coins in the cave is highly redolent of votive deposition, associated perhaps with funerary rites or commemorating those who had been decapitated in the cave a few generations earlier (an event that may even have taken place within living memory).

Although all of the coins date to AD 320–64, not all need relate to the hoard itself; indeed, some of the genuine Roman issues (as opposed to indigenous copies) appear to have been deposited separately (see section 5.14.4), perhaps as part of the

ongoing funerary and/or votive use of the cave. It is tempting, for example, to invoke the tradition (common in the ancient Mediterranean world) of placing a single coin in the mouth of the corpse in order to pay the ferryman Charon for the soul's journey across the River Styx to the underworld (Morris 1992: 105). Alternatively, as noted above, the pierced coins may represent items of personal adornment, and may even – together with copper alloy objects and glass and amber beads – have formed part of a putative necklace (see section 5.14.3). An apparent preference among these pierced examples towards coins bearing 'falling horseman' and 'wolf and twin' motifs may be symbolically significant.

The survival of this material, seemingly unburied and unhidden and including precious materials such as silver, would seem to suggest a strong taboo against its disturbance or removal. This is particularly striking since it appears that people repeatedly visited the cave: lighting fires, cooking food and retrieving certain human bones for use or deposition elsewhere. As such, the Sculptor's Cave appears to have retained its sacred status for more than a millennium.

#### PARALLELS FROM BRITAIN AND BEYOND

Mortuary rites in Scotland during the first few centuries AD are almost as fugitive as in the Late Bronze Age. Funerary activity in the immediate area around Covesea is limited to 'quantities of human bones' including 'entire skeletons' reported to have been found in and around the fabric of the ramparts of Burghead (Macdonald 1863: 358), though nothing more is known of these antiquarian discoveries. Compilation of the available data for Scotland as a whole suggests a diverse range of practices (Wallace nd), none of which are likely to account for a significant proportion of the population. While rites of inhumation burial came to dominate parts of southern Britain at this time, there is no consistent funerary tradition in north-east Scotland until the emergence of square barrow cemeteries, which appear to have their floruit in the fifth and sixth centuries AD (eg Alexander 2005; Mitchell and Noble 2017: 22). There are two such cemeteries in the vicinity of the Sculptor's Cave: at Wester Buthill, some 7km to the south-west (adjacent to one of the likely routes across the marsh to the west of the former Loch Spynie; illus 7.3), and at Pitgaveny, some 8km south-east of the Sculptor's Cave on the south side of the former loch (Mitchell and Noble 2017). Both, however, are likely to significantly post-date funerary activity at the Sculptor's Cave. As before, therefore, the majority of the dead in Roman Iron Age Scotland must have been disposed of in ways that have left little or no archaeological trace, with much of our evidence for mortuary practices deriving from stray, disarticulated bones on settlements and other non-funerary sites (Armit 2017).

We have already noted that the dry, salty environment of the Sculptor's Cave, together with the periodic lighting of fires, appears to have promoted the preservation, and perhaps mummification, of Roman Iron Age bodies. One possible parallel for this practice comes from Crosskirk in Caithness, where excavation of a small figure-of-eight building revealed the skeleton of an elderly man, buried in a seated position with his head and upper torso projecting above the floor of the building. To maintain this position, the body must have retained a degree of integrity, suggesting some form of mummification (Fairhurst

1984; Armit 2017). Recent AMS dating places this individual's death in the period cal AD 330–540 (Tucker and Armit 2009). Although rather later than the funerary activity at the Sculptor's Cave, it serves to demonstrate the possibility of mummification as a mortuary practice in Roman Iron Age Scotland.

Despite this general paucity of funerary evidence, there are some instances of human bones dating to the first few centuries AD from caves in various parts of Scotland. Aside from the perforated cranial fragment from Fiskavaig rock shelter (see section 8.5.2), a further, recently identified example comprises the remains of an adult female, dating to 108 cal BC–cal AD 55, found during antiquarian investigations at one of the Oban Caves, most likely Distillery Cave (Armit et al 2016), and apparently associated with a Roman Iron Age fibula (Alison Sheridan pers comm).

There are further potential parallels at three caves in East Lothian. At Archerfield, for example, two caves are recorded as yielding human remains associated with Roman Iron Age pottery and glass bangle fragments (Cree 1909), while juvenile human remains and a Roman Iron Age bronze pin were recovered from Rhodes Links Cave, North Berwick (Richardson 1907). It is by no means certain, of course, that these human remains date to the same period as the Roman objects found with them; the AMS dated Late Bronze Age infant cranium from Borness Cave, Kirkcudbrightshire (section 8.5.1), for example, was apparently recovered with Roman Iron Age objects (Corrie et al 1874; Clarke 1875; 1878). It is also worth noting that St Baldred's Cave, in East Lothian, has been discussed above in relation to possible Late Bronze Age activity (Sligo 1857), but the dating evidence is insufficiently precise to confine mortuary activity in the cave to this period.

Other Scottish caves have produced evidence for Roman Iron Age activity but without the presence of human remains (cf Robertson 1970; and updates in Hunter 2001). In the same broad region as the Sculptor's Cave, for example, Caird's Cave, on the north coast of the Moray Firth, has produced AMS dates suggestive of Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age activity (Anderson-Whymark 2010). A series of caves in Fife – Wemyss Caves, Constantine's Cave and Kinkell Cave – have also produced a scatter of Roman material (eg Wace and Jehu 1915; Gibson and Stevens 2007).

Looking beyond Scotland, activity in this period is documented from caves across the British Isles, though only a minority have yielded human remains (Branigan and Darne 1992: 6). Among the latter, it is worth noting the assemblage from Wookey Hole, Somerset, where at least 28 individuals dating to the fourth century AD were found (Hawkes et al 1978; Branigan and Darne 1990). Even in the absence of human remains, however, the quantity, quality and variety of Roman Iron Age metalwork found in caves (often dominated by personal ornaments and toilet instruments) suggests votive deposition rather than the more functional interpretations advanced in previous studies (eg Branigan and Darne 1992).

#### THE WIDER ROMAN IRON AGE LANDSCAPE

As with the Late Bronze Age, settlement evidence for the area around the Sculptor's Cave in the Roman Iron Age is relatively poorly known. Although the radiocarbon dates currently available for Burghead do not suggest rampart construction before the

fourth–sixth centuries AD (Harding 2004: 248), a Late Bronze Age spearhead found in the nineteenth century (Anon 1890; see section 8.5.1) and a radiocarbon date of AD 240–430 from beneath the rampart (Edwards and Ralston 1980) hint at earlier occupation. Recent excavations have also identified an important settlement site dating to the first few centuries AD at Clarkly Hill (Hunter 2012), around 1.5km east of Burghead and 5km to the west of the Sculptor's Cave (illus 1.8). A radiocarbon date of AD 80–340 for one of the roundhouses suggests that settlement here was contemporary with funerary activity at the cave. The extensive roundhouse settlement at Birnie, some 12km to the south of the Sculptor's Cave across the former Loch Spynie, was also occupied at this time (Hunter in prep). Both Birnie and Clarkly Hill have yielded Roman coin hoards, suggesting that their inhabitants had access to the sorts of material found at the Sculptor's Cave.

Across the Moray Firth, there is some limited evidence for activity broadly contemporary with the Sculptor's Cave from Caird's Cave, which has produced AMS dates indicating a human presence in the Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age (Anderson-Whymark 2010), although the nature of this activity is presently unknown.

## 8.6 The question of continuity

### 8.6.1 *An Iron Age lacuna?*

The discussion so far has centred on the two most archaeologically visible periods at the Sculptor's Cave: the Late Bronze Age and the Roman Iron Age, for which we have evidence for the deposition of both human remains and various typologically diagnostic objects. During the intervening centuries, however, both human remains and obvious votive deposits appear to be absent. This apparent absence reflects a wider pattern across the British Isles of a reduction in the levels of human activity in caves at this time. The relative lack of evidence for Iron Age activity has been observed, for example, in the numerous caves of the Yorkshire Dales (Lord and Howard 2013: 246), and a similar situation has been noted by Dowd (2015: 160) for Irish caves. Of course, not all human activity in caves need have left a material trace. The Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, for example, writes in the middle of the first century AD that the druids 'in secret, and for a long time (twenty years), . . . teach many things to the noblest males among their people, and they do it in a cave, or in a hidden mountain defile' (Romer 1998: 107). Such ascetic activities will always be hard to document archaeologically but might in some cases explain the persistence of certain caves in local consciousness and memory.

### 8.6.2 *The nature of the Iron Age activity*

It is clear from the AMS dating sequence that activity at the Sculptor's Cave persisted across the centuries that separate the two key episodes of mortuary activity in the Late Bronze Age and the Roman Iron Age (see chapter 4). In particular, we see a continuity of visits involving the cooking and preparation of food and the periodic construction and modification of structures around the entrance area. Relatively deep deposits that built up within the

entrance passages during this time, including layers of paving and cobbling, hint at more than informal use of the cave for shelter (see section 2.4). What, then, was the nature of activity within the cave over this long period, from around 800 BC to the early centuries AD?

Given the demonstrably high levels of organic preservation, it seems improbable that mortuary rites could have continued within the cave over this period without leaving any evidence of human remains. There are, nonetheless, hints that some forms of ritualised activity continued. The deposition of a dog in the West Passage, for example, appears to represent a formal and deliberate act (section 2.4.4). This is unsurprising, since the isolation of the cave and the difficulties of access make it unlikely that it was ever used for any mundane, day-to-day activities. Yet, positive evidence for ritualistic use is hard to trace.

In some ways, the absence of obvious Iron Age votive deposition is not unexpected. The material culture of the Early and Middle Iron Age in Scotland is notoriously impoverished, as demonstrated even at long-lived, continuously occupied sites like Broxmouth hillfort (Armit and McKenzie 2013). Those objects that do occur are often conservative types that are not generally amenable to fine-grained typological dating. The paucity of unambiguously Pre-Roman Iron Age material culture at the Sculptor's Cave, therefore, need not be particularly significant. Furthermore, votive offerings might have been made within the cave in the form, for example, of perishable foodstuffs, textiles, furs etc. At present, however, we can say little more than the fact that the cave remained sufficiently important in the lives of local communities that they made regular and repeated visits over many generations; visits which would undoubtedly have involved encounters (deliberate or not) with the Late Bronze Age dead.

### 8.6.3 The Iron Age underground

The absence of human remains from the Early and Middle Iron Age deposits at the Sculptor's Cave is particularly striking, however, since this is a period when we see funerary activity at a number of other Scottish caves. Human remains recovered from antiquarian excavations at MacArthur Cave, Oban, represent at least four adults dating to the Early and Middle Iron Age (Saville and Hallén 1994). Although the context of these bones is unknown, evidence of gnaw marks suggests that they were exposed rather than buried, either within the cave or in some other location (Tucker 2010). A large section of bone removed post-mortem from one cranium may represent a 'blank' for the production of a perforated cranial fragment, of which several examples are known from Scotland (Shapland and Armit 2012). Several other caves around Oban have also yielded human remains, including the tantalisingly named 'Cave of the Skulls' (RCAHMS 1975: 60), but in most cases the chronology is uncertain and could range from the Early Neolithic to the post-medieval period.

More recently, excavations at High Pasture Cave on Skye have produced evidence for mortuary activity dating to the Early and Middle Iron Age, including the deposition of disarticulated remains as well as the complete body of an adult woman and several neonates (Birch et al forthcoming). In general, however, the character of human activity at High Pasture Cave is markedly different from what we see at the Sculptor's Cave. As well as the

chronological differences (all of the human remains at High Pasture Cave fall within the period during which mortuary activity at the Sculptor's Cave is absent), the character of the material assemblage is very different: while the Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age assemblages at the Sculptor's Cave are characterised by the deposition of small personal items, including valuable materials such as gold and silver, the assemblage from High Pasture Cave is essentially mundane and dominated by coarse stone tools. Nonetheless, the occasional deposition of exotic items, notably the charred remains of a wooden lyre (Birch and Wildgoose 2013: 82–4), demonstrates the special character of the site.

As well as natural caves, the Iron Age in Scotland sees the increasing use of artificial subterranean environments. Souterrains, for example, found in a variety of forms across much of Scotland, created underground spaces which were often entered directly from above-ground structures (eg Armit 1999). Most striking, however, are the artificial 'wells' found below some northern broch towers, such as Gurness in Orkney, where the difficulties and intricacies of construction seem to far outweigh any practical benefit (Armit 2003). At Mine Howe, also in Orkney, a similar structure – set within an apparently natural mound and accessed by a series of steep narrow steps – formed the focal point of an Iron Age enclosure (Card and Downes 2003). Clearly, access to the subterranean world remained important in Iron Age cosmology, whether through visits to natural caves or by the creation of artificial underground structures.

### 8.6.4 Underworld encounters

Whatever the precise nature of the rituals enacted at the Sculptor's Cave across the *longue durée* of its use, it seems to have been a place where religious practice was formalised and controlled. The timber structures of the Late Bronze Age suggest the restriction of access and the choreographing of movement into and around the cave. Access continued to be controlled in the Early and Middle Iron Age through the construction and maintenance of stone and turf structures (with associated gateways) in the entrance passages. The apparent continuation (or perhaps reinvention) of the cave's religious importance almost 1000 years later certainly hints at some form of conceptual continuity from the Late Bronze Age to the Roman Iron Age. Indeed, it may be that we should not see the human remains of those two periods as especially significant in themselves; perhaps the bodies, rather than being the focus of mortuary activity, simply comprised the more visible elements of a broader repertoire of votive offerings to the cave and its supernatural occupants over the course of a millennium and more.

## 8.7 Closure and commemoration

### 8.7.1 Sealing a spiritually dangerous place?

Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian sources attest to the continued perception of caves as liminal places closely connected with the otherworld well into the early medieval period (eg Gummere 2001; Semple 2013: 72) and we have little reason to doubt that similar perceptions would have existed among the Picts of

north-east Scotland. As we have seen, however, finds potentially associated with early medieval activity are limited to three bone pins and a glass bead (section 5.14.3); these may well be votive offerings (since they fit the general profile of objects deposited in earlier periods) but there is little other evidence for ongoing use of the cave at this time.

As might be supposed for the carving of Christian crosses onto the cave walls (section 3.5.5), the Pictish symbols around the entrance passages of the Sculptor's Cave may have been intended as a means of ritually sealing this conduit to the underworld, preventing the egress of malignant supernatural beings. A similar interpretation might indeed be forwarded for the early medieval knotwork-style serpents on the entrance walls at the King's Cave, Arran (Thomas 1961), a motif which occurs frequently at entrances and boundaries for the purposes of confusing evil spirits and 'to keep demons at bay' (Gell 1998: 84). As we shall see, however, it may be that the Pictish symbols at the Sculptor's Cave had a more specific meaning that related to the history of the cave itself.

### 8.7.2 Memorialising the dead

The traditional dating of Pictish symbols to between the sixth and eighth centuries AD suggested that the carvings that gave the Sculptor's Cave its name were several centuries removed from the period of Roman Iron Age mortuary activity. As we have seen in chapter 3, however, recent reassessment of the chronology of Pictish symbols, based primarily on evidence from Dunnicaer in Aberdeenshire (Noble et al 2018), indicates that they may have appeared as early as the fourth century AD (even if the classic corpus of motifs familiar from Class I stones was not formalised until rather later).

The latest datable 'event' relating to the Roman Iron Age use of the Sculptor's Cave is the deposition of the coin hoard sometime after AD 364. Given the new, extended chronology for Pictish symbols, it is possible that the carvings were created at around the same time or perhaps within a few generations, when memories of the cave's funerary and votive role would have been relatively fresh. Indeed, it may be that we should seek to understand the carvings as an act of closure; the final episode in the long sequence of mortuary activity at the cave.

If we accept the suggestion by Samson (1992) and others that pairs of symbols denote personal names, then certain of the symbol pairs at the Sculptor's Cave could be interpreted as commemorating specific individuals, eg the fish and crescent and V-rod, and the flower and triple oval (see section 3.5.2). If this is so, then these names are not otherwise represented in the Pictish corpus, perhaps supporting the suggestion that they relate to an earlier

period (and are, for example, referencing archaic names). Other symbols, however, occur singly or in scattered groups, breaking the semantic conventions elucidated by Samson (1992: 40–1). This is not necessarily surprising, since Samson's interpretation deals essentially with symbol stones; we need not assume that Pictish symbols were used in the same way in other, perhaps earlier, contexts. Nonetheless, it is not impossible that at least some of the symbols carved around the entrance to the Sculptor's Cave represent named individuals.

In this respect, the earlier use of the cave cannot be overlooked. The human bones seen on the cave floor by Benton (1931: 176) would presumably have been far more obvious at the time when the symbols were carved. Indeed, given the preservative qualities of the cave, it is not inconceivable that recognisable mummy bundles and/or discrete piles of bones or body parts were still visible. The decapitations, and the names of those killed, would almost certainly have been remembered through stories, or directly through genealogy. If the Roman Iron Age decapitations do indeed represent a single event of political and/or religious significance, then the circumstances of this group's demise would

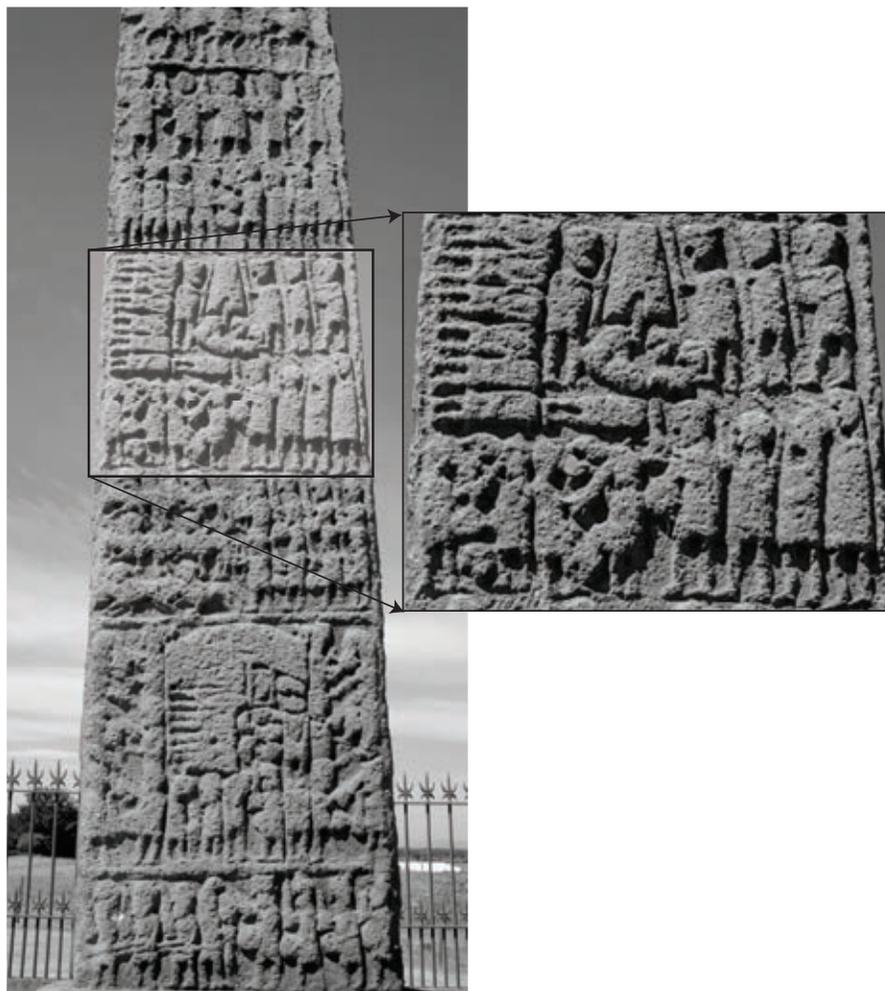


Illustration 8.5

Suena's Stone, Forres, with inset showing detail of the decapitation scene (© Historic Environment Scotland, Tom and Sybil Gray Collection, SC 1409220)

presumably have been well known. Indeed, it may be that those who now occupied positions of power in the region wished to commemorate their fallen ancestors. In this sense, the Sculptor's Cave could have been transformed, through the deployment of the symbols, from a place of communal religious and funerary practice to a memorial for a particular group of individuals.

As a coda to this, it is interesting to speculate on a potential link between the Sculptor's Cave and a nearby Pictish monument at Forres: the iconic cross slab known as Sueno's Stone, erected during the ninth or tenth centuries AD (McCullagh 1995; illus 8.5). Indeed, the sandstone slab itself was most probably brought from the coast near Covesea, some 15km distant (Shepherd 1986: 122–3). On the reverse of the cross slab is a complex narrative scene depicting a battle and its aftermath (Henderson and Henderson 2004: 135). It is unclear who the two sides might be; it has been suggested that the stone commemorates a victory by the men of Moray over the Vikings (Shepherd 1986: 122–3) or by the Scots over the Picts (Sellar 1993: 108). Amid the battle scenes, however, one remarkable panel shows the decapitation of seven prisoners next to an unusually shaped object that has been variously described as a broch or a bell (see Sellar 1993 for discussion of the various hypotheses). The broch interpretation seems unlikely, since not only were these structures entirely absent from this region, but they had been out of use in their primary tower-like form for around a millennium by the time the stone was carved. The shape of the object is also rather unconvincing as a bell; however, it does bear an intriguing resemblance to the mouth of a cave set into a cliff face. Given the proximity of Covesea, it may be worth considering the possibility that this scene in fact alludes to the violent events at the Sculptor's Cave some centuries earlier: the same events that may have been commemorated by the carving of the symbols into the fabric of the cave itself.

### 8.8 Conclusion and prospect

The Sculptor's Cave has much to teach us about what it meant to live and die on the Moray Firth in the first millennia BC and AD, and the longevity of memory associated with special places in the physical and mental landscapes of the time. The dead of later prehistoric Britain have long seemed elusive, with most interpretations, such as the likely ubiquity of excarnation, being based more on the absence than the presence of evidence. The Sculptor's Cave has offered us a unique window into the diversity and complexity of funerary rites in the Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age, and has highlighted the role of caves as places for the dead. No other archaeological site in Britain has provided primary evidence on this scale for the protracted mortuary rituals of the Late Bronze Age, involving the deposition of richly adorned mummy bundles; indeed, the Sculptor's Cave contains the largest assemblage of hair rings in the British Isles, and other items of personal ornament which are usually found in hoards

rather than in association with the dead. In this sense, the Sculptor's Cave bears comparison with other exceptionally well preserved cave sites across Europe, such as the Trou de Han in Belgium and Bezdanjača Cave in Croatia, suggesting the existence of widespread cosmological beliefs surrounding caves and the dead. The distinct but equally complex mortuary practices of the Roman Iron Age have also revealed entirely new insights into the treatment of the dead in this period, while the decapitations represent the product of a violent and seemingly politically motivated 'event' of a kind rarely witnessed in the archaeological record.

Although caves are often associated with the earliest periods of prehistory, they remained central to the beliefs and practices of later, more complex societies, not just across Europe but worldwide. The long sequence of human activity at the Sculptor's Cave has highlighted the role of caves as enduring places in the landscape, where the material remains of one generation moulded the thoughts and actions of the next. Caves were places of permanence, where social memory was formed and enacted: conduits between past and present, framing and shaping human activity through the centuries. The extraordinary locational, morphological and experiential qualities of the Sculptor's Cave made it an ideal locus for communal gathering over many generations, while the Pictish, and later Christian, symbols marked it out as a dangerous reminder of a pagan past whose forces needed to be contained. This long sequence of activity characterises not just interaction of individuals with the Sculptor's Cave, but echoes the central role of caves in prehistoric cosmologies across Europe and beyond.

This publication does not mark the end of work on the Covesea Caves. Recent excavations at a number of the caves, although conducted so far on a relatively small scale, have already begun to show that the Sculptor's Cave belonged to a complex coastal landscape utilised by communities from the Middle Neolithic onwards, and perhaps even earlier (Büster and Armit 2014; 2016). While funerary activity was underway at the Sculptor's Cave during the Late Bronze Age, bodies were also being deposited in Covesea Cave 2, some 500m to the west, and possibly elsewhere along the coast; indeed, the Early Bronze Age dates returned for some of these bones suggest that this stretch of coast was already revered as a place of the dead long before activity at the Sculptor's Cave began. When funerary activity resumed at the Sculptor's Cave during the Roman Iron Age, people were also apparently visiting a cave known as the Laird's Stable, to the east, where small-scale votive deposition has been identified. So far, none of these other caves has provided evidence for the continuity of use seen at the Sculptor's Cave, or for the wealth of archaeological deposits spanning the Late Bronze Age to the Roman Iron Age; but enough survives to demonstrate that this difficult and inaccessible coastline was a place to which people returned over many centuries, leaving their familiar world of farmscapes and fields to commune with the spirits of the underworld.