

The Pegasus Stone, Oswestry:

Verification of a recently-discovered later prehistoric engraved stone

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Professor George Nash was invited by Rodney Farmer to verify a relatively recent-discovered engraved stone which currently stands in the Oswestry Town Museum.

The stone was recovered during an archaeological watching brief in February 2008 from undergrowth near the main entrance to the hillfort, close to the western outer ramparts of Old Oswestry Hillfort (**Figure 1**). The stone, along with another was found close to a mature hedge and their location may be the result of historic tillage/field clearance. The stone weighs around 100 kg and was partially buried in top soil (Rodney Farmer *pers comm.*). It was initially examined by Heather Hidden (Oswestry and Borders History and Archaeology Group) and Maggie Rowlands. Later inspection of the stone by Margaret Worthington and Maggie Rowlands in late March 2008 noted possible engravings on two of its faces.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STONE

The Pegasus Stone is so-named due to a probable bas-relief horse that is carved onto one of its faces (**Plates 1 & 2**). The stone measures c. 0.75 x 0.40 by 0.30m wide. According to a preliminary report by Rowlands, the geology of the stone is Carboniferous Millstone Grit and was probably glacially-transported from a local source. One of the faces displays a large number of linear incision marks, the majority of which may represent ard-marks or more probably successive scoring produced from a metal plough-shear during historical times. Alternatively, but in my view unlikely, is that they represent glacially-scored striations; other unlikely suggestions include rune inscriptions, saw-marks, incisions formed by arrow sharpening and tally marks.

Initial inspection by the author recognises several important engraving elements. The horse outline, located within the central section of the face appears to have been partly or fully shaped by human agency. It is probable that original surface (or crust) immediately around the horse outline had, during later prehistory, eroded away naturally, with the exception of the crust that survives immediately above the horse's back. It is more than likely that natural crust formed an ideal shape for an artist to form a bas-relief image of the side view of the upper torso and the head of a horse. Various attributes that distinguish a horse shape can be clearly identified including the ear, the shape of the crest, forehead, muzzle, and the back (including the croup, dock and withers).

The author identified two engraving techniques: bas-relief and incision; the latter using a metal tool. It should be noted that Later Prehistoric bas-relief engraving onto stone is an extremely rare technique in North-western Europe.

Despite the numerous ploughmark incisions, several patinated linear marks are recent and are the result of damage caused by a toothed bucket which was used during groundworks around the

western section of the hillfort.¹ One of these incision marks appears to run diagonally from an area above the back of the horse and terminates on the horses crest.

Between 15 and 20 horizontal lines, probably ploughmarks extend across the face, terminating to the right of the bas-relief line that forms the chest and shoulder of the horse. A distinctive incision line forms the withers, back and croup. This line is a clear intentional act of carving by an artist which successfully ties-in the head with the upper torso; it is certainly not natural or accidental.

DISCUSSION

Prior to removal, the stone was located close to two Scheduled Monuments: Wat's Dyke and Old Oswestry Hillfort (see REID & MARRIOTT 2010; DORLING & WIGLEY 2012) and it is more likely that there is an association indirect or otherwise with one or both of these monuments. Based on data present within the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS), the area around Old Oswestry Hillfort has, not surprisingly, yielded a wealth of artefacts that date the Iron Age, Roman and later Celtic periods (NASH 2013).

Later prehistoric [Neolithic and Bronze Age] engraved rock art can be considered a rare occurrence in Wales and the Welsh Marches. What survives usually comprises mainly cupmarked rock-outcropping or occasional portable stones with single and multiple cupmark motifs (NASH *et al.* 2005). Recently, NASH has identified a correlation between later prehistoric abstract rock art and hillfort activity with a number of portable examples being found with the curtilage of at least four Welsh Marches hillforts (2011). As far as the author is aware there are no representative examples in Western Britain that date from this period. However, liberally dispersed throughout north-western Europe is a wealth of figurative engraved art that includes both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images using a variety of artistic styles; these examples have their influences firmly embedded with the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures in central Europe. The date range for this phenomenon extends the Iron Age and Celtic periods (c. 1000 BCE to AD 1000) and the subject matter usually includes deities, gods and mythical beasts.

The horse is prevalent in later prehistoric and early historic mythology and various notable representations are found across much of the Celtic and Roman Europe. The shape and size of the horse varies and is found within a number of contexts including coinage, metalwork, pottery and stone. GRUFFYDD (1953) and, more recently HUTTON (2013) have suggested a possible association with the veneration of Celtic goddesses Epona and Rhiannon.

In summary, and going through a process of illumination, the majority of incisions on the Pegasus Stone are not natural but derive from either accidental or intentional human agency. Those incisions of accidental origin are probably the result of plough damage, whilst those of intentional origin can be considered rock art, probably Iron Age in date. Incorporated into this artistic endeavour is a probable reworked bas-relief outline of a horse with good proportional elements around the upper torso and head. Many of the outline attributes either worked by human agency define the crest, ear, forehead and muzzle of the horse; a clear and intentional line extends from the crest to form the horse's back.

The dating of this piece of artistic endeavour is problematic; however, according GREEN (2004) a horse cult was widely practiced within the tribal area of the *Cornovii* and therefore one can consider the Pegasus Stone to be either of Celtic or Celto-Roman influence. During use, probably acting as some form of (roadside?) shrine or ritual display, this unique engraving would have been a potent

¹ Following removal, the stone was stored at the property of Rodney Farmer

symbol of a warrior-dominant society; however, its original provenance and use can only be surmised.

FUTURE TREATMENT AND RESEARCH

Given its potential rarity, the so-called Pegasus Stone is of potential national importance. I am of the view that this stone should be fully-recorded using a variety of techniques that includes a complete tracing of the two surfaces using the *Valcamonica* technique; the various engraving episodes traced onto industry-standard acetate sheeting, applying internationally-recognised recording conventions.

In terms of finding other engraved stones within the area where the Pegasus Stone was found, I would suggest further field-walking, in particular careful scrutiny of loose stones that occupy the hedgerows that run alongside Wat's Dyke, north and south of Old Oswestry Hillfort.

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PLATES & FIGURES

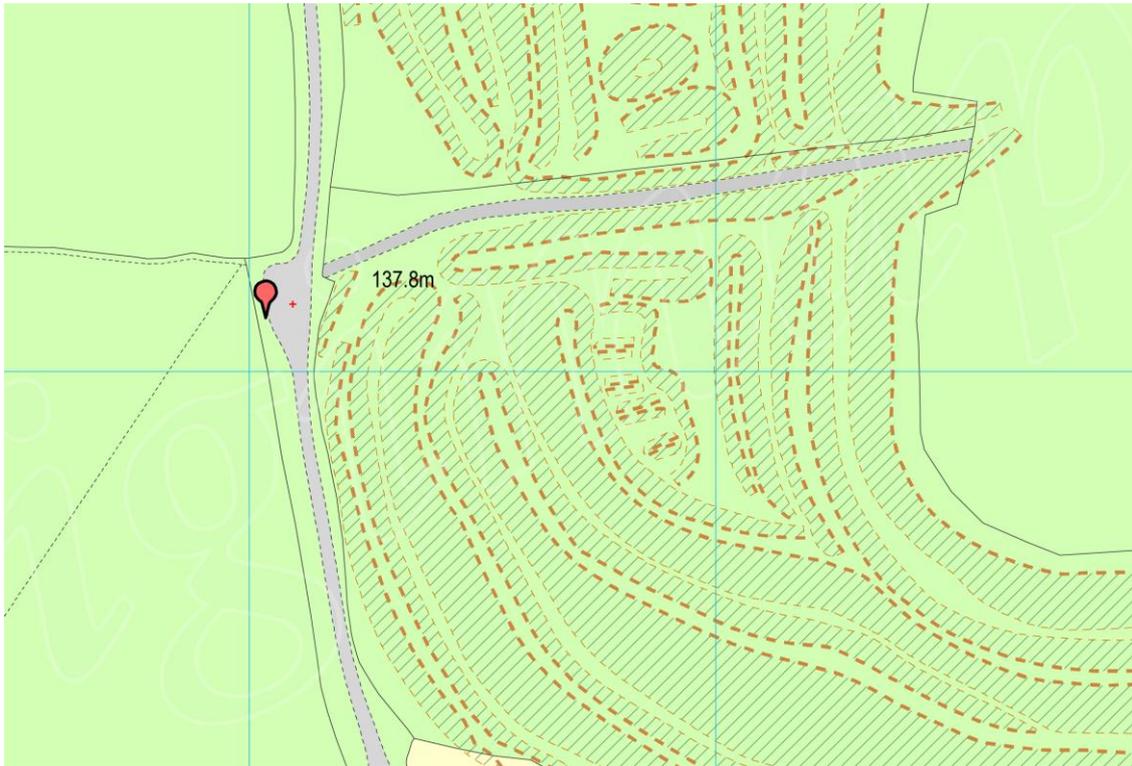


Figure 1. Approximate location of the Pegasus Stone

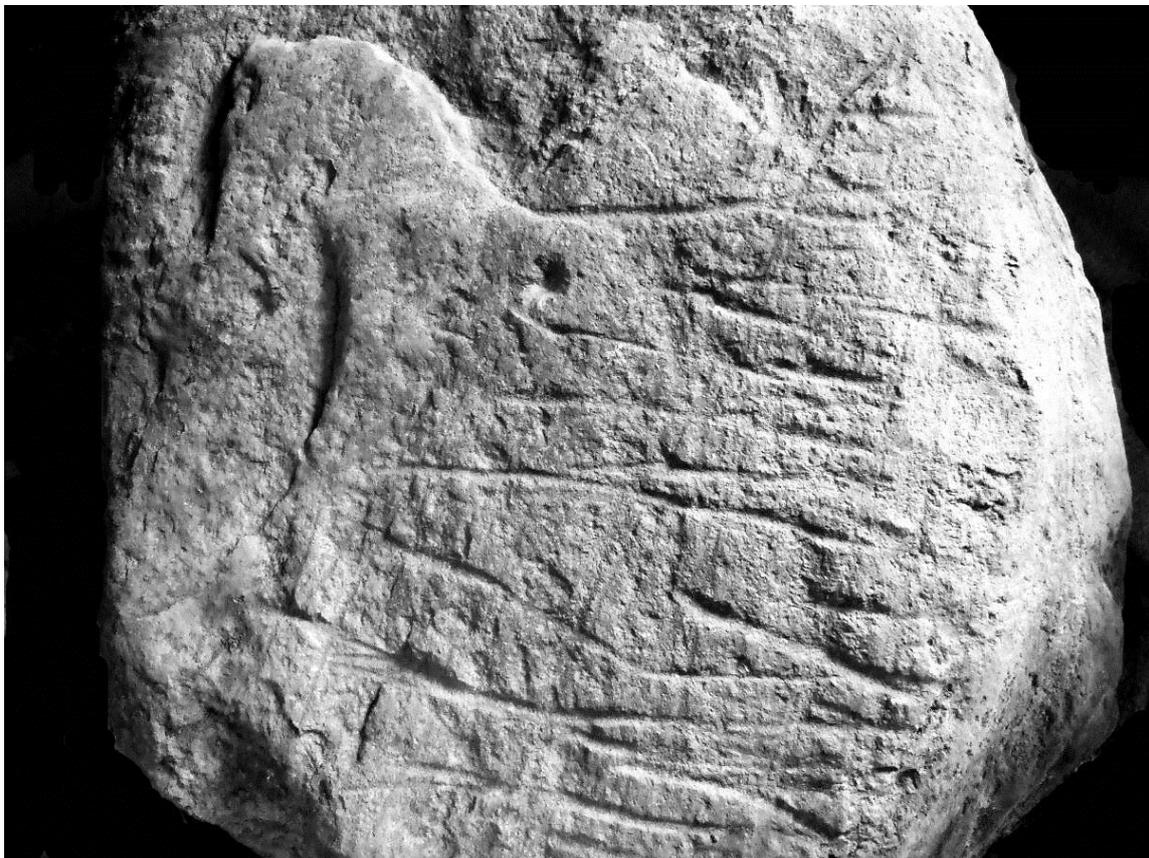


Plate 1. The central section of the Pegasus Stone showing the torso and head of a horse²

² Manipulated images; the original was supplied by Rodney Farmer



Plate 2. Manipulated image of the Pegasus Stone using D-Stretch