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A POSSIBLE MESOLITHIC ENGRAVING IN AVELINE'S HOLE, BURRINGTON COMBE, NORTH SOMERSET

by

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ABSTRACT

In July 2003, a group of engraved crosses were found in Aveline's Hole, Burrington Combe. Although it has not been possible to apply direct dating techniques to them, the evidence from their appearance and their archaeological context suggests that they may have been engraved during the early Mesolithic at a time when the cave was in use as a cemetery. Evidence for portable art from this site is also reviewed

INTRODUCTION

Aveline's Hole, in Burrington Combe (Figure 1), was discovered in January 1797 and immediately came to the attention of antiquarian investigators owing to the large number of human skeletons found in the cave when it was first opened. During the 19th century a number of well-known antiquaries dug there. Further excavation, with the discovery of more human remains, was done by the Bristol Speleological Research Society in 1912-14 (Williams, 1999 p. 230), but the most systematic investigations were carried out by the University of Bristol

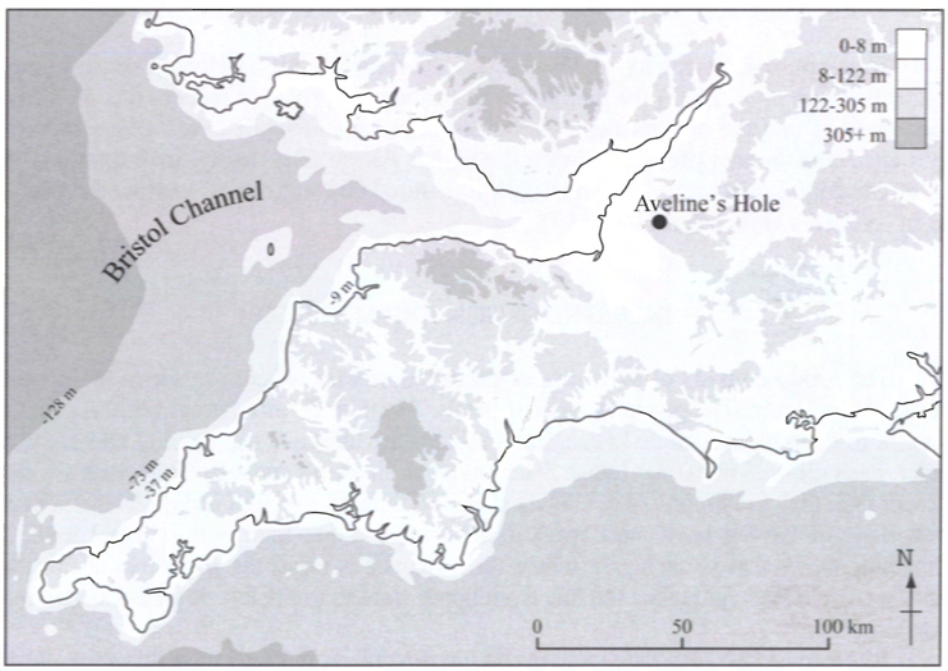

Figure 1. *Location map.*

Spelaeological Society during the 1920s (Buxton, 1925; Davies, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1925; Fawcett, 1920, 1922, 1925; Keith, 1924; Tratman, 1922, 1923). Sadly, owing to the premature death of the leading investigator, J. A. Davies in 1931 and to the loss of most of the collection, including virtually all of the documentation, during wartime bombing on November 24th 1940, no final comprehensive report on the Society's work was ever published. Work on the collection has continued, however (see for example Burleigh, 1986; Donovan, 1968, Tratman, 1977). Most recently, work by Schulting and Wysocki has emphasised the importance of this site as "...one of the most important Early Mesolithic burial sites in Europe. Certainly it is by far the largest known Mesolithic Cemetery in Britain" (Schulting and Wysocki, 2002).

In broad outline, these studies have found evidence of human activity in the cave from late-glacial times until the Mesolithic. This evidence could be interpreted as follows: hearths found on the floor of the First Chamber indicate human activity within the cave. This activity was probably domestic and probably seasonal, occupation of the cave occurring between the end of July and the end of February (Davies, 1924). Contemporaneous with the hearths, or at the end of the period of their usage there was a burial of two individuals beneath them in the "deep pit" about 20 m from the entrance. Later, and datable to the Early Mesolithic, there was repeated use of the immediate entrance area of the cave as a tomb. During this period, of around 200 years, the cave is likely to have been kept closed, or at least been kept curated, between burials as the remains were not buried but simply laid on the floor of the cave and, on discovery, showed no sign of disturbance by anything other than small scavengers such as rodents. Immediately after the last burial, possibly around 8,800 BP, the cave was permanently sealed and remained that way until its rediscovery in 1797.

DISCOVERY OF THE ENGRAVING

Following the discovery of Palaeolithic cave art at Church Hole, Creswell Crags in early 2003, (Bahn *et al,* 2003) the possibility of further such finds in this country immediately became obvious and the authors began a systematic search of those caves where the archaeology indicated a human presence during the Upper Palaeolithic. Initial investigations in the caves of Cheddar Gorge were inconclusive, but in July 2003 a group of engraved crosses was noted in Aveline's Hole (Figures 2 and 3).

INTERPRETATION AND DATING

The group consists of two rows of engraved crosses. There are six in the upper row and four in the lower. The group is approximately 25 cm wide and 20 cm high. At first sight they seem to form a continuous lattice, but although the lines are sub-parallel and come close together, each cross is a distinct image. The engraved lines are approximately 1 mm wide and shallower than they are broad. They show a slight asymmetry in width and unevenness in depth characteristic of having been made with a stone edge rather than with a metal tool. Close examination shows that in each case where the sequence is clear, the line running from upper left to lower right was cut before the line from upper right to lower left. Figure 4 shows this for the top left cross.

It is very difficult to date rock engraving directly as removal of material in engraving does not leave traces in the way that the application of material, as in painting, would. Most clues to the age of such figures must therefore be indirect. In the case of Aveline's Hole,

Figure 2. *The Aveline's Hole engravings.*
Photo: Andrew Atkinson..

however, the possibilities can be narrowed down as the archaeological evidence shows that the cave was probably sealed from shortly after the emplacement of the final burial in the Mesolithic, about 8,800 BP, until its rediscovery in 1797 (Davies, 1925; Tratman, 1975). Thus if an engraved mark on the wall can be shown to be more than 200 years old, it is highly likely to be more than 8,000 years old.

In the case of these engravings they seem to show a degree of patination/weathering that is not shared by other, obviously modern, graffiti on nearby parts of the cave walls. For comparison there is modern graffiti a few metres deeper into the cave on the same wall. This is much "fresher" in appearance, not having yet changed in the same way.

Underlying the upper line of crosses is a black deposit. At first glance this seems similar in appearance to soot graffiti. However, close examination does not reveal any intelligible graffiti and the marks also appear to be beneath the calcite. Similar black marks can be seen elsewhere in the cave. It has not been possible to establish the precise nature of this phenomenon as sampling would directly affect the engraving. It may be either carbon or manganese dioxide.

The lines seem to be covered in places by a thin layer of calcite, as evidenced by some nearby flaking. However, Dr. Alistair Pike then of the University of Oxford, now of the Department of Archaeology, University of Bristol, has advised that U-series dating of the calcite substrate is, in this case, unlikely to produce conclusive evidence. He reported that:

> "Unfortunately no clear relationship between the engraving, calcite layers and bedrock can be easily established. It is most likely that most of the calcite underlies the engraving and although a very thin layer may have been deposited after the execution of the design, any U-series date of the calcite is likely only to provide a maximum date for the engraving. Since it is certain that the cave was sealed from 8,000 to 200 years ago, the only diagnostic U-series result would be a maximum age of less than 200 years (i.e. demonstrating the engraving is recent). A maximum date greater than 8000 years would not rule out the possibility that the engraving was recent, but merely demonstrate the age of calcite formation. Since it would be very difficult to measure a U-series date in a sample as young as 200 years I feel little information would be gained from U-series dating." (Alistair Pike *pers. comm.*)

Furthermore, some of what overlies the engraving is mud, rather than calcite and the calcite itself is highly discoloured, thus impure and unlikely to give a clear date. Any estimate of the age of the engravings can therefore only be based on their condition and their form.

Modern graffiti, for the most part, appear to consist of identifiable writing, normally dates or initials, or is representational in nature. Purely geometric motifs such as this are significantly less common. Nash, who has previously compared Mesolithic rock art and modern graffiti is aware of no examples of the latter which resemble these engravings (G.H. Nash, *pers. comm.)*. On the other hand parallels can be drawn from Upper Palaeolithic contexts, as early as the Solutrean from the Grotte Cosquer (Jean Clottes, *pers comm.*) and, later, from the early Magdelenian at Le Gabillou (Breuil, 1952; Leroi-Gourhan, 1967). It is also the case that most known Mesolithic decoration is of a similar abstract nature (see for example Hinout and Angelier, 1968; Quinnell *et al*, 1994 and Tassé, 1982. Probably the closest British parallel is to the Late Upper Palaeolithic engraved horse jaw from Kendrick's Cave, Llandudno, Gwynedd, Wales, now in the British Museum. We are grateful to Jill Cook for drawing this piece to our attention.

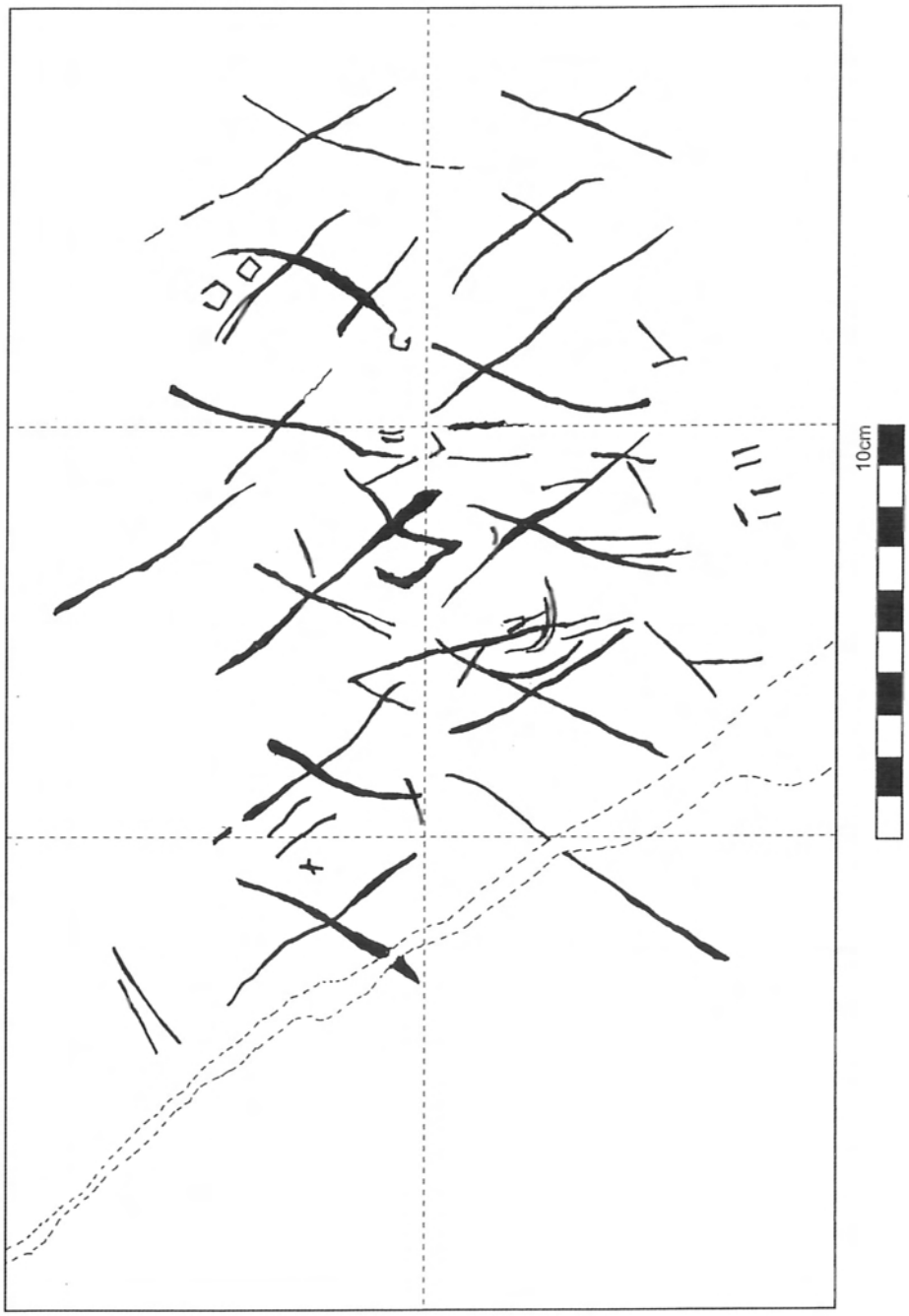

Figure 3. *Drawing of the Aveline's Hole Engraving.*
Drawing: G.H. Nash.

Figure 4. *Top left-hand cross showing the order in which the lines were cut.*
Photo: C. Binding.

It is thus possible that these lines are of early Mesolithic or earlier age. We believe that they are most likely to be Mesolithic as this was the period that saw the most intensive use of the cave and, in addition, this period is the most closely associated with abstract designs of this type without associated representational artwork. However, the evidence now available does not permit us to exclude a Late Upper Palaeolithic age, though perhaps it is less likely.

"PORTABLE ART" FROM AVELINE'S HOLE

In the context of this paper, it is worth noting the finds from this cave that might be regarded as "portable art". There are two pieces, a decorated bilaterally barbed antler point and a fragment of long bone with a series of cut lines. Sadly, both pieces were destroyed in 1940.

Whether the items used as personal ornamentation also found in the excavations count as *art* either as commonly understood or as used in the context of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic archaeology is something of a moot point. These consisted of a series of pierced shells of *Neritoides obtusatus*, seemingly strung as a necklace (Davies, 1921 p. 69 and Figure 10 - 2) and drilled teeth of horse[1] and red deer, notched teeth of pig (Davies, 1925) and a "drilled metapodial of a carnivore, probably *Ursus Arctos*" (Tratman, [1975]b). No note of this last item has been published as it was discovered after the preparation of the 1925 report. In so far as it is

[1] On the basis of the illustration in Davies (1925, Page 104 Figure 1 - 7) Jacobi (*pers comm.*) considers that the damaged horse incisor is probably a bovid incisor. He notes that the markings parallel those found on a fang from Kendrick's Cave.

possible to place finds from this cave in context, following the loss of the documentation, the shells appear to be associated with the later burials and the teeth and bear bone, along with the incised bone, appear to be associated with at least one of the earlier burials, under the hearths. The antler point cannot be directly associated with either set of burials. A group of ammonites (Donovan, 1968) was also associated with the earlier burials.

Just as the British record is, as yet, poorly furnished with cave art, so is its portable art currently sparse. The only pieces of representational portable art known from either the Palaeolithic or the Mesolithic of Britain are the fine horse's head from Robin Hood Cave, Creswell Crags and the human figure apparently carved on a section of woolly rhinoceros rib found in Pin Hole Cave, also at Creswell Crags. Both are now in the British Museum; the latter is currently being reassessed (J. Cook, *pers. comm.).* All other British finds are simply engraved with lines whose purpose may be either decorative or utilitarian.

The bilaterally barbed antler point

This item was unearthed in 1919 or 1920 approximately 10 m from the entrance to the cave and 8 inches below the surface of the red cave earth (Davies, 1921). It was drawn by Davies and published in his Figure 10. He described it thus:

> "It is made of staghorn, and the curved surface is polished and decorated with a conventional design made by incised lines, as shewn in the diagram. A similar design is cut in the under surface. The point is rounded and the butt is notched, as if for the attachment of a line. The texture of the cancellous tissue shewn in the harpoon is like that of the giant Cervus antler and the weapon is very similar to one found in Kent's Cavern, Staghorn harpoons of this type are characteristic of very late Magdalenian times."[2]

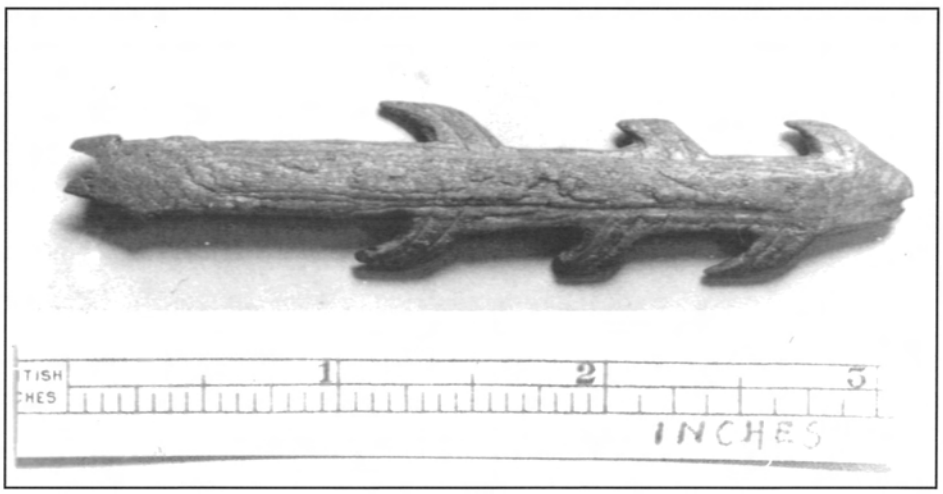

Figure 5. *The Barbed Antler Point from Aveline's Hole.*
Photo: H. Taylor.

[2] It should be noted that the attribution to giant Cervus simply indicates a large specimen and not one from a Giant Deer, *Megaloceros giganteus*

This object was shown to the Abbé Breuil who "pronounced it to be Magdalenian 6b". This attribution was accepted by Davies, although this gave him some difficulties in explaining its presence in what he regarded as an early Tardenoisian context. Campbell, on the other hand, although he was working from casts as the original had by then been destroyed, seemed to believe that the barbed antler point fitted with his attribution of the Aveline's Hole assemblage as "perhaps transitional from Later Upper Palaeolithic to Mesolithic" (Campbell, 1977, p. 163). Recently, both Clottes and Jacobi have seen the photograph reproduced here as Figure 4 and agree with Breuil's conclusion that it is Late Magdalenian. It is probably safest to say that there are both Late Upper Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic elements at this site and that with the loss of the original material and the documentation it is difficult to be precise about either the attribution or the exact context in which it was found. The photograph, Figure 5, is from a previously unpublished print taken by Herbert Taylor. Two casts of this piece, of varying quality, survive in the Society's Museum.

The engraved bone

The second item to be considered is a piece of bone which was probably found in 1923, apparently in association with the ceremonial burials in the "deep pit" (see above). It was identified as a fragment of the shaft of a deer tibia 12 cm in length. Davies' description is as follows (1925, p. 107):

> "This broken bone bears on its surface two series of six equidistant cuts. The marks were not made by a graver, but with a knife, the face of the bone being pared away."

Figure 6. *The Engraved Bone from Aveline's Hole.*
Photo: H. Taylor.

Davies published a photograph of this piece (1925, Plate VII No. 5). Figure 6, here, is from a previously unpublished photograph by Herbert Taylor and shows the piece after repair. Little more can be said about this piece save to point out the coincidence of the cuts being arranged in groups of six and the upper group of crosses of the wall engravings also being a group of six.

Finally, it should be recorded that two pieces of human long bone in the collection were identified by Tratman during the 1970s as possibly showing signs of intentional engraving. One (catalogue number M1.1.13/148) was submitted to the British Museum for comment and was considered to show signs only of gnawing by small rodents; the other (M1.1.14/139) is considered to have been accidentally marked after burial. (J. Cook, *pers comm.)*.

CONCLUSION

The evidence strongly suggests that the engravings found in 2003 are dateable to the period of the cave's prehistoric use by man, that is to some point from the Late Upper Palaeolithic to the Early Mesolithic. Peoples of these times are known to have decorated their surroundings and their possessions in such ways elsewhere in Europe and finds have long been known from this site which show that the early inhabitants of Burrington Combe were no different in this respect from their contemporaries elsewhere.

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