An Analysis of Prehistoric Cave Burials in the Magnesian Limestone region of north-east Derbyshire

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Introduction

The Magnesian Limestone plateau in north-east Derbyshire is home to several historical and archaeological places of interest, including Bolsover Castle, Hardwick Hall and Creswell Crags. Less well-known sites include the Iron Age hillfort at Markland Grips, Clowne and Roman settlement at Scarcliffe Park, Whaley. Even less well-known are the many caves and fissures that litter the region, from Pleasley in the south to Whitwell in the North, caves that contain a plethora of archaeological evidence that sheds light onto landscape use and settlement patterns of the region in early prehistory. At least seven of these cave sites contained prehistoric human remains, potentially dating from the Late Upper Palaeolithic to the Iron Age. The following article investigates these remains and attempts to place them in a cohesive narrative, as up until now this has only been available in isolated reports and books. By listing and comparing the skeletal remains, it is possible to create an overlying pattern that seems driven by the landscape and by early ritualistic beliefs.

Earliest Prehistoric Remains

‘Studies of cave usage in antiquity have tended to interpret human activities at cave sites as either ritual (including art, burial, and votive deposition), or as subsistence-related, for instance domestic occupation, storage, industrial activities, and refuge’ (Chamberlain 2007, 66). Many of the caves in the region bear evidence for both ritual and subsistence, which makes for an interesting study, particularly as this region is also home to Britain’s only known Palaeolithic cave art, in the Church Hole at Creswell
Crags. Given that the Church Hole is the only cave at Creswell to house cave art (save for two, small isolated pieces in Robin Hood’s Cave and Mother Grundy’s Parlour respectively) Paul Pettitt (2003) has suggested that the Nottinghamshire side of the gorge (on which Church Hole is located) can be interpreted as being ‘different’ from the Derbyshire side, and argues that what we are seeing is a ‘land of the living’ (Derbyshire) and a ‘land of the dead’ (Nottinghamshire). Or in Chamberlain’s words, a domestic landscape versus a ritual landscape. The lack of Late Upper Palaeolithic occupational evidence within the Church Hole cave, to which the cave art dates, supports this view. And yet, if the Nottinghamshire side of the gorge was the ritualistic ‘land of the dead’, why do all three main occupation caves on the opposite side contain human remains, and examples of portable art?

Admittedly, some of these remains have now been radiocarbon dated to much later in prehistory, but not all, and these appear to have derived from Late Upper Palaeolithic contexts. For example, John Campbell recovered a frontal fragment from a human skull from layer OB in Robin Hood’s Cave in 1969 and this initially seemed to be of Late Upper Palaeolithic date. A radiocarbon sample from horse bone from the same stratigraphic level gave a date of 10, 390 ± 90 bp, which is later than might be expected but at least attests to the skull fragment’s antiquity. However, chemical testing on the nitrogen levels of the fragment revealed a rather high content (3.89%), which would suggest a much later date. Oakley (1980, 16) has pointed out that many other caves have revealed Late Pleistocene bones with a high nitrogen content, but from his results we can see that a further three human bones also had relatively high nitrogen levels (3.81%, 4.12% and 3.94% respectively). In 1974 a human mandible was discovered in Robin Hood’s Cave approximately one metre below the travertine floor (Oakley, 1980),
and nitrogen testing on this specimen gave a level of just 1.1%, which is much more contemporaneous with the Devensian cave-earth and suggests that Campbell’s fragment from layer OB and the other human bones recovered are in fact much later in date.

In 1877, the Reverend J. Magens Mello and William Boyd Dawkins recovered a human skull from Mother Grundy’s Parlour at Creswell Crags. At the time they believed the skull burial to have been ‘in situ’, as did Jenkinson (1984) when he reviewed the stratigraphy surrounding the skull, but again subsequent radiocarbon dating has placed it in the Iron Age (2020 ±80 BP, OxA-736). In total, at least twelve separate ‘burials’ of human remains have been discovered at Creswell Crags, and of these eight related solely to the skull (ie. skull, skull fragment, mandible, tooth).

**Skull burials: The Buried Soul?**

As well as the high percentage of skull fragments and the complete human skull from Creswell Crags, two more of the region’s caves housed prehistoric skull burials: Langwith Bassett Cave at Upper Langwith and Whaley Shelter No. 2 at Whaley. The first of these to be discovered was the Langwith skull, found by the Reverend Edwin Mullins in 1903. Mullins was searching for an alleged secret passage from the nearby church when he discovered the entrance to the cave, and upon excavation he noted what he believed to be a ‘natural arch’ made of rock caused by a partial roof collapse. In reality, it was most likely a purposefully made ‘container’ to house the skull. It consisted of five or six stones resting between the cave wall and a larger stone (Mullins 1913) with the skull placed inside. Sir Arthur Keith examined the skull and noted that
the jaw had been ‘broken away’, and that it was the skull of an adult male probably between 45-55 years old. No other human remains were recovered from Langwith.

The skull from Whaley was discovered by Alan Leslie Armstrong and his team in July 1947. It was broken into pieces and so was removed with the surrounding matrix and sent to Sir Arthur Keith for analysis, who later recovered sixty-eight separate pieces of the skull and re-assembled them back into the (nearly) complete specimen. The skull was buried at the back of the cave with its base facing downwards and its front (ie. face) towards the cliff wall (Brothwell 1966). And just like at Langwith, the skull had been placed between a large rock and the cliff face, with tabular pieces of rock stood on edge to ‘enclose’ the skull burial. Other human remains recovered from the cave included a tooth, vertebrae, phalanges and part of a pelvis, although it is impossible to tell if these all related to each other or to the same individual as the skull. Armstrong (1948) argued that ‘the maxillae and base of the skull have apparently been removed, presumably for access to the brain’, but Brothwell points out that there are no cut marks, and that both the face and cranial base are often subject to fragmentation should the skeletal remains be disturbed. As the skull is an isolatory burial, it was most probably brought from somewhere else. Armstrong (1949) also suggested the damage to the skull in the form of square holes in the top and both sides were indicative of stab wounds made by a spear, but again Brothwell counters this claim by reminding us the skull was in pieces, and that the holes may simply be missing pieces. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that ‘skull cults’ are known within Europe (although generally dating to the Iron Age) and many societies believe the power of a person, or their soul, is contained within the head. Evidence from Gough’s Cave at the Cheddar Gorge in Somerset revealed ritualistic practices relating to human remains dating to the Late
Upper Palaeolithic / Mesolithic, where clear cut marks can be seen on a human skull made by flint tools. It is also evident that the skull was ‘scalped’ and that the muscles that hold the jaw in place had been severed, possibly to remove the jaw and abstract the tongue. Claims of cannibalism have been suggested, but as there is no obvious shortage of food (ie. there is an abundance of animal bones from the same layers) this seems unlikely. It is much more likely that the practice related to some form of post-mortem ritual. The skulls of animals also appear to have been venerated in prehistory, as at Fox Hole Cave at High Wheeldon in the Peak District the skull of a brown bear was discovered, placed on top of some rocks and with a flat stone covering it, in essence ‘housing’ the skull within. A similar example can be noted at the Chauvet Cave in France.

Later prehistory: the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age burials

Ash Tree Cave at Whitwell was also excavated by Armstrong, in the late 1940s / early 1950s. Inside the inner chamber, Armstrong discovered a pile of stones that contained the bones of two individuals, one of which was an adult male approximately 18-20 years old. Although the remains were well preserved, both the skull and mandible were missing, as was the pelvis. A further burial deposit included several bones and two mandibles, one of which belonged to an infant. At the back of the inner chamber was a stone cist with the remains of two more individuals, including a mandible that showed signs of osteoarthritis. Artefacts recovered from within the cave showed it had been used from Neanderthal times right through to the Neolithic. The human remains have been radiocarbon dated to the Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age (3730 ±90 BP, OxA-
Later radiocarbon dating also placed the Whaley Skull in this period (3470 ±65 BP, OxA-4021) and also further human remains recovered from Mother Grundy’s Parlour at Creswell Crags (3790 ±70 BP, OxA-2351 & 3720 ±80 BP, OxA-4442), highlighting a multi-period use for the majority of cave sites from the region. An obvious pattern emerges that most if not all of the caves were initially used as occupation sites (Neanderthal, Late Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic) with the majority of human burials coming from the Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age and into the Iron Age. Whaley Shelter No. 2 also housed the largest collection of Neolithic pot sherds from any one site in the entire region, with Grimston ware, Peterborough ware and Grooved ware all apparent (Hart 1984). And the Sepulchral Cave, or Bone Cave, in the cliff below the Markland Grips Iron Age hillfort, near Clowne also contained Neolithic human burials. Armstrong recovered the remains of at least five individuals in 1924 that had been buried behind a retaining stone structure in a cave just 1m wide by 2m high and 3m deep.

**Tombs in the Landscape: creating a ‘false cave’**

Aside from the many cave burials within the region, evidence of human burials is noticeably lacking. Only two burial mounds have been explored, with only a handful of others known for the area. The first monument to be explored was a small round barrow located within Scarcliffe Park, Whaley, just south of the Owl Spring. Harry Lane excavated this in 1969-70 and found it to be approximately 11m in diameter and containing a central burial housed within a stone cist. From Lane’s description, the remains were a Bronze Age crouched burial complete with grave goods including a
bronze awl and a small, jet V-perforated ‘button’ found underneath the skull. From its location, it may rather have been a talisman or pendant that was believed to be special by its owner or those who buried them. A number of flint tools including a knife and several Bronze Age pottery sherds were found close to the mound. In 1988, a Neolithic long mound was discovered whilst quarrying at Whitwell, and excavations between 1988-89 suggested it was close to 130ft in length and built in several stages. Initially, a small wooden building was constructed to house the single burial (rather unique for a Neolithic long mound) of a young, adolescent female. Radiocarbon dating placed the burial to around 5380 ±90 bp. Thirty-two feet to the north-west of the original burial a second wooden building was built, this one larger and deemed to be a communal mortuary house. This contained the jumbled remains of several individuals and many showed signs of weathering and gnawing by animals, which would be expected from the excarnation processes of the period. The bones reflected at least fifteen individuals of both sexes and of all age ranges. The evidence of the traditional burial rituals of the period makes the isolated female burial even more striking. Eventually, both funerary buildings were ‘contained’ within large stone cairns, with the mortuary building then contained within an even larger cairn, before a huge burial mound was constructed over the top of both cairns and edged with retaining kerb stones. Radiocarbon dates from two separate bones from the mortuary building reflect very close dates of 5190 ±100 bp and 5115 ±70 bp.

Why some human remains were buried in the local caves when a large funerary monument was in close proximity is unclear, although radiocarbon dating seems to suggest a gap of at least four hundred years between the long mound and the majority of cave burials. It is a general trend to find Neolithic long mounds in areas where there
are no caves, although Derbyshire as a whole appears to be an exception to this rule. Although the Whitwell long mound is the only known example from North-east Derbyshire, there are at least a further eleven examples in the Peak District. Strikingly, all these occur on the Limestone of the region, mirroring the example at Whitwell. It is my belief that burying the dead in caves is a reflection of early religious belief, and attests to the worship of an Earth Mother. Burial is therefore a method of inserting the dead back into the Mother Earth from whence they came, and what better way of doing this by using caves, effectively as far into the earth as one could get. It is (usually) only when caves are not available that ‘false caves’ are constructed. The stone structure found in long mounds (chambers) and round barrows (cists) are in effect the ‘cave’ and the earthern mounds heaped over them reflect the Earth. One way of interpreting this is an inner womb within an Earthen stomach, and the entrance passages into Neolithic long mounds may represent a ‘birth canal’. Removing the bones from inside the burial mounds to be used in some form of ritual may represent a ‘rebirth’ and can therefore be linked to ancestor worship, which is in essence why burial mounds are constructed on high plateaus and false crests of hill sides – the ancestors (or the dead) are above the living looking down on them.

This may then take us back full circle to the use of the caves at Creswell Crags from a ritualistic perspective. Perhaps the art at the Church Hole is symbolic of a spiritual connection from a religious perspective, and the cave was an early religious site. It is ironic, therefore, that some unsuspecting Victorian aptly named the cave the Church Hole. What we see, in conclusion then, is the re-use of caves in later prehistory for the deposition of the human dead, as ‘with the transition from foraging to farming…there is increasing evidence for the use of caves for votive deposition and as locations for the
interment of human remains’ (Chamberlain 2009, 40). A more detailed and widespread landscape study of known and / or potential burial mounds and an exploration of cave sites may add further weight to this subject, as would fitting this into a wider settlement study of prehistory in the region.

References


Pettitt, P. (2003) Discovery, nature and preliminary thoughts about Britain’s first cave art. *Capra 5*