

## **An Investigation of Pluais na Scriobh**

### **Abstract:**

This essay explores the nature and of some of the more unusual examples of rock art found in Ireland, with a particular focus on a site located on the Beara peninsula known as 'Pluais na Scriobh'.

Rock art is an inherently difficult area to study as the establishment of chronologies and stylistic context is the basis of much (archeological?) debate. This leads to problems in classification of new sites containing features that do not fit with established interpretive canons. What do we do with a site that is like no other or can only be compared in broad terms with anything else we know of?

With this question in mind, this essay attempts to broaden our understanding of Pluais na Scriobh and rock art in general through comparison with other sites and interpretive traditions.

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## **Introduction: 1**

Rock art in Ireland has long been a cause of fascination as people have tried to better understand the meaning of this abstract art form. Today its literal meaning is the cause of much controversy which often only adds to confusion but its study may still be able to shed light on other practices of the people who created it. Why did people choose to embellish often quite prominent places in the landscape with their stylised art? What role did location play in choosing a rock to carve? Why is there often a set of symbols that appear repeatedly in similar contexts such as the differences between megalithic and rock art? Do the two styles or traditions share a common origin or do they represent different traditions? It has long been held that rock art and megalithic art are two separate traditions and that they do not necessarily relate directly to each other. It has also been put forward that one inspired the other but which inspired which is still very much in doubt. The scientific dating of inscribed rocks is notoriously difficult and so archaeologists are forced to use less precise methods such as stylistic dating which of course requires an accepted chronology of events before one even starts.

### ***Aims & Objectives: 1.1***

The Aim of this paper is to further our understanding of Pluais na Scriobh as an enigmatic example of rock art in Ireland. How does this site fit in with what we already know about rock art traditions? Can it be related to other sites? What kind of activities may have been associated with Pluais na Scriobh and rock art sites in general. This will be primarily achieved through Stylistic analysis of the carvings with comparisons being sought in both Ireland and abroad that might help us. Secondly I will look at this site in its landscape context bearing in mind also the role and setting of other rock art sites within their respective landscapes. This comparative analysis will I hope help to establish a framework within which we can perhaps view this and other unusual rock art sites. I have visited the site many times and the details given in the site description are primarily based on my own observations and photographs.

## Background: 2

The Name Pluais na Scriobh translates as “the cave of the scribings” and this at least is an appropriate title. Two enormous boulders lie against each other forming a small cave or what is perhaps better described as a Boulder-Shelter *fig 2.1*. The Shelter can be accessed from the east or the west and it is the interior southern wall that bears the scribings. Thousands of linear incised marks that are mostly vertical in nature but other lines run across horizontally linking the lines together into groups *fig 2.2*. Other patterns also appear in the form of crude X and Y shapes that



*Fig. 2.1 view of eastern entrance to Pluais na Scriobh*



*Fig. 2.2 Detail of typical motif at Pluais na Scriobh*

occur through out the incised surface *fig 2.3*. There are also several lines that are much longer and deeper cut that appear to divide the surface of the rock into more general areas *fig 2.4*



*Fig 2.3 Detail of X and Y motif*



*Fig 2.4 Long deep incisions directly below crescent*



Fig 2.5 Crescent shape



Fig 2.6 Possible cup marks

and one large deep crescent shaped incision is located near the top and centre of the rock *fig 2.5*. The confined nature of the cave and sheer size of the incised area make documenting the rock very difficult as one can never be more than half a meter from the rock face and the incised area is approximately 7 meters long and 2 meters high. There are also several depressions that may be cup marks but may also be natural features of the rocks surface *fig 2.6*. It is a well documented practice in cup and ring mark examples of rock art to embellish natural depressions by further working them into the cup and ring motif (Bradley, 1997). Whether or not this is the case here, it is however clear that who ever made these marks used the natural shape of the stone with its depressions and cracks to enhance the effect of the carving.



Fig 2.7 Detail of V motif

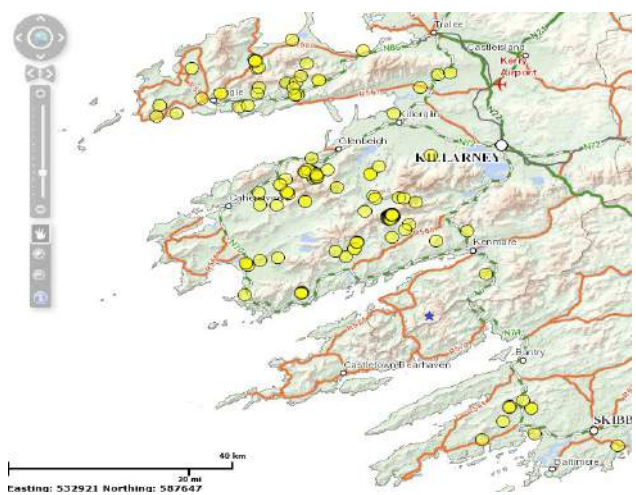


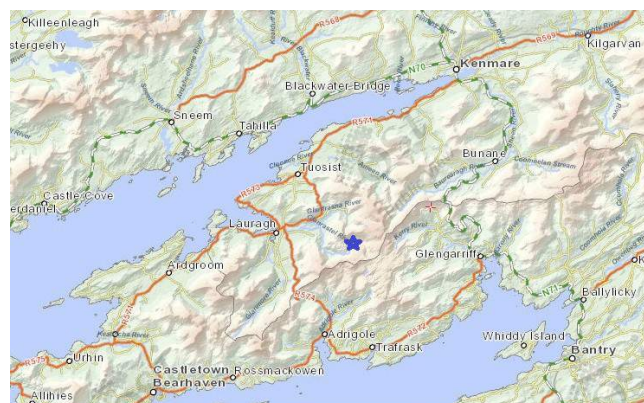
Fig 2.8 Rock art Distribution map: Blue Star at PNS

There are so many incisions that not all can be simply described in the terms laid out above and there are many small individual marks that form V shapes and other simple patterns *fig 2.7*.

It would seem with only perhaps minor exception that all of the carvings are of a similar type in that they are incised by a sharp object that gives each incision a V shaped profile.

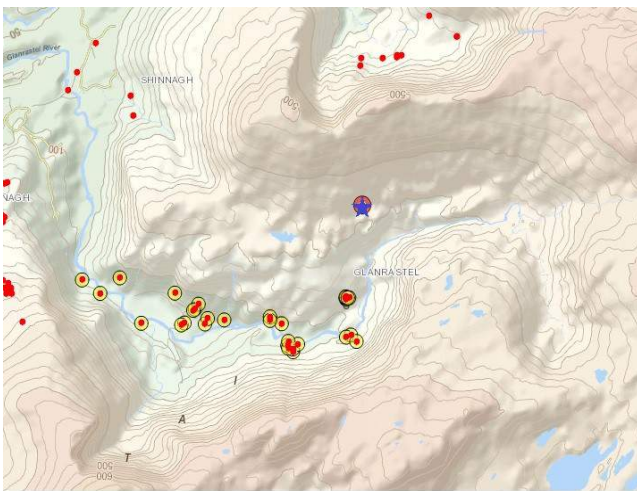
### ***Location and Landscape : 2.1***

The location of this cave or Boulder-shelter is also worth noting as there are no other known examples of rock art within 20Km of the site which is unusual for county Kerry. Kerry and the South west in general is one of the key regions of Irish rock art with 178 prehistoric examples known in Kerry alone (Byrne et al, 2009). This distribution continues into the extreme west of county Cork where we find a further 10 examples. The Beara peninsula sticks out in this distribution due to its lack of rock art *fig 2.8* despite there being plenty of prehistoric activity throughout the Peninsula (O'Brien, 2009). One must wonder if this is in part due to a lack of investigation or else there is a unknown explanation as to why this peninsula contains little or no known rock art. Pluais na Scriobh therefore seems even more unusual when one considers its relative isolation from other comparable sites. Within a 50 KM radius of the site there are 6 other documented sites described as rock scribings (incised linear patterns) as distinct from rock art (National Monuments Service, 2013), but none of them are as remote or nearly as extensive as Pluais na Scriobh and occur in open air settings and not protected by a cave or Boulder-shelter, except for one site. These other sites however are also poorly documented but are listed on the



*Fig.2.9 Map of the Beara Peninsula, Blue Star marks PNS*

RMP (ibid). Pluais na Scriobh is located in the Glenrastel Valley just on the Kerry side of the Cork/Kerry border. The valley is today uninhabited but recent archaeological surveys carried out in the area have recorded numerous hut sites and enclosures that are quite likely prehistoric in the basin of the valley (Byrne et al 2009) *fig2.9* . The valley itself is very dramatic in its appearance as the southern side is overshadowed by a 400 meter near vertical rock face *fig 2.10*. Pluais na Scriobh itself is on the northern side of the valley and perhaps several hundred meters higher in elevation than any other



*Fig 2.10 Hut sites and enclosures in yellow. Blue Star marks PNS*

*Fig 2.11 View to the south over looking centre of the Valley*

known site in the immediate area. This valley was in the past according to local knowledge one of the only passes through the Caha mountains that run the length of the peninsula (Grant, 1999). Only in the early part of the twentieth century was a road built over the mountains through an adjacent valley and since then there has been no passing traffic in Glenrastel. Its location however at the edge of what was occupied land may also be significant as this is often typical of rock art sites (Bradley, 1997). Also its association with much more recent journey routes through the mountains means one cannot rule out a much less antique interpretation for this site (Shee Twohig, 2004). Some have suggested that it could pertain to something as mundane as the counting of sheep as people moved through the mountain. I find this hypothesis ridiculous as how difficult is it really to



count sheep and remember the number without the aid of documentation. The scale of potential livestock in the valley is such that remembering how many are in your flock would not be too difficult.

***Previous Research: 2.2***

Pluais na Scriobh has been the focus of some investigation in the past but unfortunately this has proven largely unproductive. R.A. Macalister attempted to visit the site in 1902 but was unable to locate it on the mountain side (Grant 1999). This is understandable as is clear to all who visit the site. The reason for his interest was in relation to his work on ogham inscriptions in Co. Kerry. He had been given descriptions of the site and wished to investigate the possibility that this could be some form of proto-ogham (ibid). Had he been able to study the incisions we may be able to say more about his expert views but it would seem that any resemblance to ogham is superficial as there appears to be no specific structure to the carvings that lead it to be read as a text.

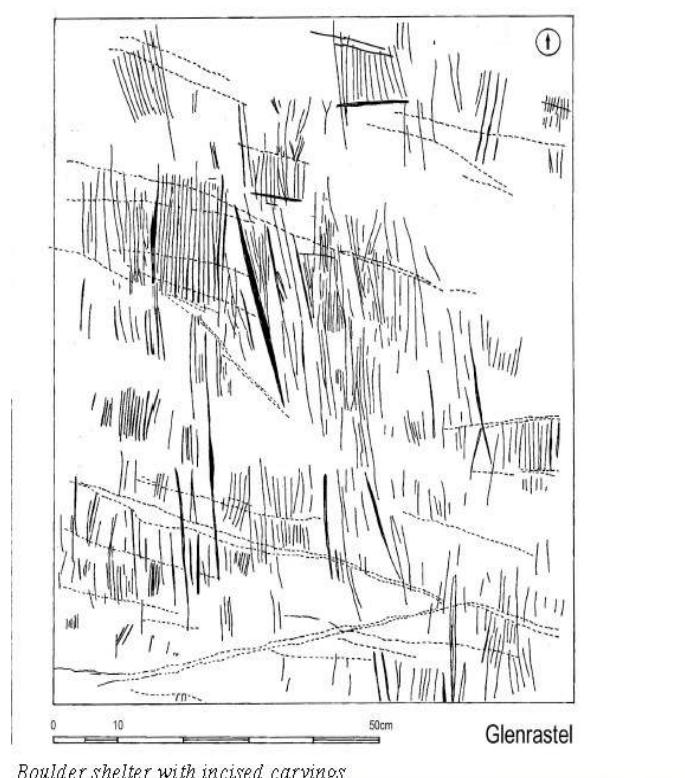


Fig 2.12 Detailed drawing of PNS published by Shee Twohig (2004) same area as fig 2.2

Shee Twohig (2004) discusses the site when she attempts to describe a new classification for incised carvings in Irish rock art. She coins the term COMBS relating to this style and named for the locations in which they occur, Caves, Outcrops, Megaliths and Boulder-Shelters (ibid). Instead of being a readily identifiable or a uniform group this is instead a collection of Rock art sites that are all unusual in terms of their motif and show a similar method of production. Here she points out that many of these sites have been associated with various other rock art traditions but that this has often been done on dubious grounds although some are clearly part of another more recognisable tradition.

The simple nature of the incised line means that anybody could at any time have added it to say a prehistoric cup and ring stone thus confusing the chronological context (ibid). Non however of the other examples given by Shee Twohig are nearly as extensive as Pluais na Scriobh and although she makes some very interesting points and draws on the similarities between here and other rock art sites Pluais na Scriobh still emerges as an unusual site of the unusual sites.

Since then the site has remained free of any serious investigation but it has since been included in the archaeological inventory of Co. Kerry Published 2009, designated KE109-050. A rough description of the site is given here but most of this information is based on an article published about the site by Grant (1999) in a book on local history, *Tuosist 6000*. There is no doubt that it is the remote nature of the site that has prevented serious research or full documentation for so long.

### **Stylistic Comparisons: 3**

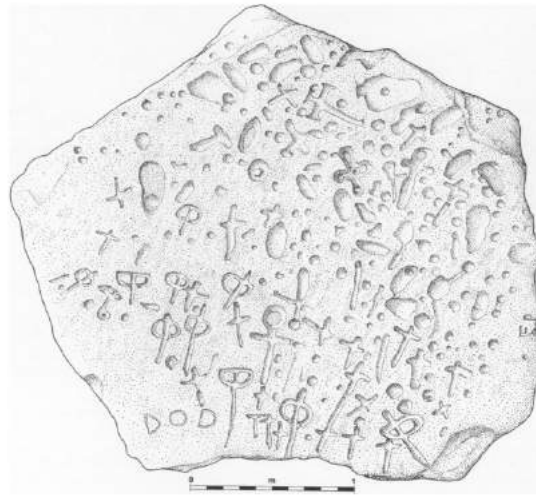
It is always important to keep an open mind when dealing with such an unknown quantity as Pluais na Scriobh and so I will compare this site to other known instances of linear markings and incised rock art in Ireland. Conor Newman (2009) has published a paper on the subject of Gaelic Irish marking of important stones such as high crosses, ogham stones and other decorated surfaces that perhaps served as territorial markers and expressions of power. Often quite deep cuts would be

made through repeatedly cutting into the stone surface with a sword (ibid). This leaves a mark that is superficially similar to those of Pluais na Scriobh but they are almost certainly of a different tradition. Firstly these sword marks seem to usually occur in quite Christian contexts and not in such remote locations. Although the setting of Pluais na Scriobh is along an ancient natural mountainous border, if the whole idea of the sword marks is to make a public expression then this would not be achieved by hiding the markings in a Boulder- Shelter deep in the mountains. As has been previously mentioned the Glenrassel Valley would have been an ancient route way through the mountains but the Boulder-Shelter itself would not necessarily even be noticed as one passes through. It is not as though it sits in a clearly defined path. Therefore its significance to elite Gaelic society is questionable as there is also no reference historically to medieval activity of this type in the immediate area. What is most telling however is the carved surface itself. In the case of sword markings only a handful of marks might appear on a single surface, not thousands. And also the depth and size of sword marks far exceed the average size of those at Pluais na Scriobh. Several marks are much larger at Pluais na Scriobh and all have the same V shaped profile that tapers away at each end like the sword marks but this simply implies that a similarly pointed object was used in both instances to create the marks.

### ***Clonfinlough, Co. Offaly: 3.1***

Shee Twohig examined this stone because of what she saw as an inconsistency in how it has been regarded and interpreted (Shee Twohig, 2002). She claims that Irish archaeologists have been too quick to designate carved rock surfaces as being from the Bronze age or even the neolithic with very little evidence. The Nature and style of the carvings at Clonfinlough do not conform with the standard pattern of prehistoric rock art, yet this site is always noted as such. At the same time however it is omitted from the discussion on prehistoric rock art indicating that perhaps more scholars are not comfortable with accepting this rock as being prehistoric in origin (ibid). The

carvings are unique in Ireland, described as similar to the *Phi* symbol of the Greek alphabet. There are also many pecked out cup marks that have also been the source of debate *fig 3.1*.



*Fig 3.1 Detail of decorated Clonfinlough Rock*

Some have suggested that they may be the product of erosion (Jackson, 1967) or that they are perhaps enhanced by the hands of people. Others have argued that this is a clear indication of the antiquity of the stone and instead claim that although some of the marks are unusual, that the stone still belongs to the cup and ring tradition. In the early part of the twentieth century several dubious interpretations were given for the inscriptions as perhaps representing a battle field (Macalister, 1921) amongst other things but today these ideas would not be given much credence as rock art in Ireland is generally not seen as figurative and literal . The other marks that appear on the stone



*Fig 3.2 Clonfinlough photographs c.1957*

include many cross marks which has led some to associate the site with other Christian sites such as Clonmacnoise in the area. It is possible that the stone falls into the tradition of cross inscribed Christian art, perhaps as a station along a penitential or pilgrimage route associated with the above mentioned Christian sites in the area (Shee Twohig, 2002). It is not possible to say for sure but it is plausible that all of the above are to an extent true. It is possible that the stone suffered from some natural erosion as it is exposed limestone that is unusual in the area. This distinctive rock may have been decorated in a cup and ring style and all of the carvings may have been added over time. We may be looking at a piece with a complex chronology that represents many petroglyph traditions. This confusion is in a way frustrating but provides us with a good reminder that carvings cannot really be dated and that composite images can be built up over time and incorporate many traditions. Pluais na Scriobh is again not likely to be the same as this as there is a much more uniformed use of motif within Pluais na Scriobh and again it is far more extensive and there is no tradition of a penitential route through the Glenrastel valley that would bring pilgrims to mark the stone. The sheer number of individual incisions at Pluais na Scriobh does however lead one to wonder over how long was this surface added to.

### ***Incised Rock Art: 3.2***

Perhaps the best comparative model is set out by Shee Twohig (2004) where she describes the COMBS rock art tradition. There is much variation in the types of sites she chooses to include within this category and it crosses many boundaries that we archaeologists have imposed on ourselves such as the distinctions between rock art and Megalithic art. She points out that incised marks appear in both of these contexts and that perhaps they can be seen as a common factor or motif in prehistoric rock art (ibid). It is also equally as likely that what we see is a later addition to both rock art and megalithic art surfaces. This may or may not have had a uniform meaning understood through convention but this is not clear to us. She also notes that several settings for

such incised marks occur in the same types of places again and again. There is however regional variation which is difficult to analyse due to the relatively small sample number of examples given. She notes that in the North East of the country mainly around Louth, Cavan and Fermanagh that incised motifs can be seen on several rock art sites (ibid). They all appear on natural rocky outcrops and all but one are on a horizontal surface *fig 3.3*. Tinure, Co. Louth is the only example in this region of a vertical surface bearing Rock art and with the exception of the linear motif used this

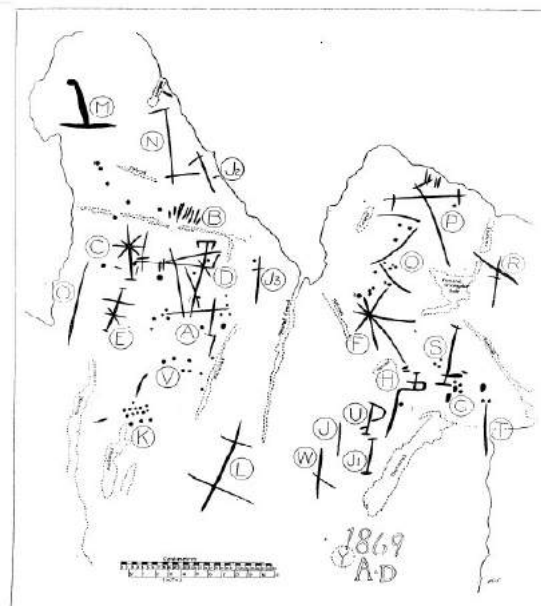
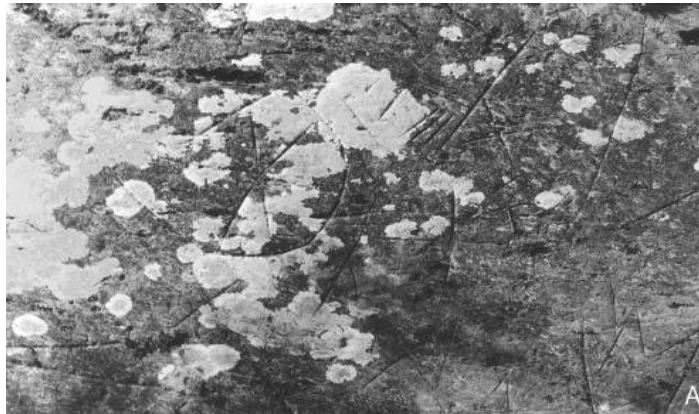


Fig 3.3 Drawing of Tinure c. 1937

stone is firmly of the cup and ring tradition (Tempest, 1939). There is other graffiti added to the rock so it cannot be ruled out that some of the incisions are a later addition but they do not seem out of place within the cup and ring context of this rock. The fact that similar motifs occurs on similar rocks in the region would seem to rule out graffiti and if it is an addition then it represents a relatively common practice of further adding to rock art sites and not a once off example of vandalism. In the Case of the South West, Boulder- Shelters would seem to be the preferred location for such incised marks (Shee Twohig, 2002) and she describes Pluais na Scriobh as the most extensive of these. There is also another Rock Shelter site located about twenty kilometres away in the Caha mountains at Cooleenlemane Co. Cork. This site bears many similarity's with Pluais na

scriobh in that it has similar incised lines that form boxes, X and Y shapes (ibid), but it also has radial and spoke patterning that is far closer to Cup and Ring motif than anything at Pluais na



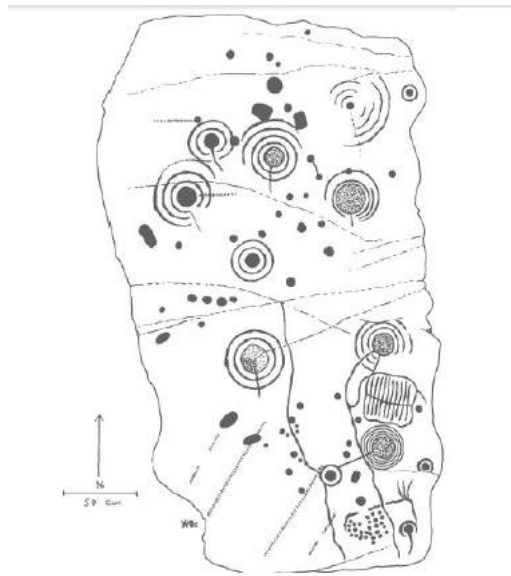
*Fig. 3.4 Detail of Cooleenlemane Rock art*

Scriobh. Cooleenlemane also lies along an old route way through the Caha mountains and occurs in a similar Boulder-shelter *fig 3.4*. It is however far less extensive than Pluais na scriobh but is perhaps the best example of something similar in the area or indeed in the country and provides a link between incised rock art and the cup and ring tradition in the South west region.

### ***Pre Historic Parallels: 3.3***

We must now consider the possibility that what is represented in Pluais na scriobh is in fact a lesser used motif that is relatively common within the cup and ring rock art tradition. Recent studies of Irish rock art are increasingly finding a reoccurring linear style that has perhaps been over looked. O'Connor (2006) in her list of over 100 motifs used in Irish rock art has identified several distinctive linear patterns that can all be seen in use at Pluais na scriobh. There are fewer examples of where the linear and ring motifs interact on the one surface. Magheranaul rock 3, Co. Donegal as described by Van Hoek (1985) is an interesting example as there is a quite densely decorated surface that has all of the typical motifs found in cup and Ring styles but for the addition of a box that contains linear markings very similar to Pluais na scriobh, *fig 3.5*. Van Hoek Describes this as a Cartouch pattern of ten lines with a cross line linking them together and all contained within a

rough rectangular box (ibid).



*Fig 3.5 Detail of Magheranaul Rock 3*

None of the Pluais na Scriobh Lines sit within such a clearly defined box but all other features of the design are similar. Van Hoek also notes that the lines are pecked and not incised like those at Pluais na scriobh. This particular rock was only discovered as a result of land reclamation work in the mid 1980's and is likely not tampered with by more modern vandals. It is quite likely therefore that the linear style could indeed be included in what is otherwise typical cup and ring motifs.

Another interesting example would be the previously mentioned unusual decorated stone outcrop at Tinure Co, Louth. This site was of great interest to Eoin MacWhite in the earlier half of the twentieth century as again it does not conform to our understanding of prehistoric rock art convention (MacWhite 1946). There are many small depressions that are likely Cup marks on the stone as well as many smaller dots that are a common feature of the Cup and ring tradition. However, most of the carvings here are linear in nature and form many unorthodox patterns. Large, crude X and Y shapes can be seen and at the section marked B in *fig 3.3* we can see something very similar to the style of Pluais na Scriobh. Shee Twohig included this stone in her COMBS



category, it being part of to the out crop portion of this classification, she notes however that this is the only vertically decorated example within this group and this is yet another similarity with *Pluais na scriobh*. Horizontal decorated surfaces are far more common, particularly in the Louth region (Shee Twohig, 2002). It would therefore seem that the Linear Motif and variations on it is part of the repertoire of the prehistoric artists and that the fact that *Pluais na scriobh* bears little other types of decoration should not be valid grounds for excluding the possibility of a prehistoric origin for this example of rock art. Nor, however does it prove conclusively that there is a prehistoric context to *Pluais na scriobh*, only that it is a strong possibility. When one looks at some of the other possibilities outlined above such as a Christen penitential station, a site of Gaelic sword marking, or even the idea explored over a century ago that this represents a form of proto ogham, I believe that the prehistoric model is most applicable and fits best the motifs used on this site.

#### **Landscape Setting and Activity: 4**

It has been the nature of rock art research to focus perhaps too much on the images themselves and perhaps other aspects such as their landscape setting have been largely ignored. Perhaps similarly with the study of prehistoric hoards where lots of study was done on the objects themselves where now more focus is directed into structured deposition and other ritual aspects of how the objects came to be discarded or stored together (Bradley, 2002). Similarly rock art can be evaluated from the perspective of its role within the landscape (ibid). Much megalithic art would usually be hidden from view and this may well have restricted access to their viewing to perhaps only an elite in society or whoever had access to the megaliths. Rock art in general is far more open and occurs in more public places. Often it occurs in places of natural prominence, Such as distinctive rock types in a landscape or at a point that commands a wide view (ibid). *Pluais na Scriobh* and boulder-shelters in general fall somewhere in between megalithic art and rock art when it comes to access. We can not know who had access to this site or even to the mountain. Even if the site was open to

who ever wanted to see it, it is still not on public display as it so remote that who ever visited the site would likely have done so deliberately. Why someone would deliberately visit such a site is another question which has been addressed through excavation by Blaze O'Connor (2003) at Drumirill Co. Monaghan. This excavation sought to identify some of the activities that were undertaken in the area surrounding the decorated outcrop. Evidence of activity from the late Neolithic throughout the Bronze Age was identified as well as several post-holes that point to a possible structure of some sort that further highlighted the outcrop within the landscape (ibid). Although we can never reconstruct the practices of prehistoric people we can say that these rock art sites were not mute objects in the landscape but were the focus of some activity and the result of considerable effort.

#### ***Spiritual Connection: 4.1***

Renfrew (1994) set out a series of criteria to help identify the presence of ritual and religion archaeologically. This type of analysis can be applied to rock art sites in Ireland and when we do this we see that there is likely a connection. Firstly there is the focusing of attention, which is clearly a part of the rock arts intended function. Firstly to draw attention to an area within the landscape and then to a particular decorated area. Structures may also be built to further emphasise a place in the landscape but sometimes this would not be necessary. Secondly there is the delineation of a boundary between this world and the next which is often present. There are many traditions the world over that associate such cross-over or liminal places with lakes, rivers, the sea, mountains and caves. These places occupy a space between land and water, sky and earth, under and over ground and the contrast of life and death can all be seen as symbolically represented in the choice of location (ibid). A Boulder-shelter serves as a good example of such a location as they often appear as a gaping hole into the earth whilst also often being in mountains and therefore occur at the crossroads between different environments and perhaps deities (Bradley 2002). Thirdly Renfrew states that the symbolic or figurative presence of a deity could be indicated through for

instance rock art or another medium he himself gives the example of the Christian Chi Ro symbol and again the parallels can be seen with Pluais na scriobh. Finally participation in rituals and offerings should be indicated in some form (ibid). This is the most difficult to relate to Pluais na scriobh but only because of a lack of excavation. Such investigations may well show structured deposition in the area around or even in the Boulder-shelter but this is pure speculation. It would appear therefore that Pluais na Scriobh adheres to the principals of identifying religion in the past and this perhaps helps to identify a possible role for the site and also a possible chronology. Almost all prehistoric rock art sites in Ireland can be seen to fit a similar model and so it is possible that Pluais na scriobh belongs to this tradition whereby religious or spiritual ideas were represented through rock art and association with particular places and features within the landscape.

**Cultural Comparisons: 4.2**

One never wishes to draw too much on ethnographic evidence to superimpose meaning on what we don't understand but in many other cultures such as the Sami in Scandinavia and others, rock art often has a spiritual significance (Bradley, 2002). In some cases they represent narratives or rituals and activities. But these interpretations are usually only attributed to more figurative art and not the

	Entoptic Forms		San Rock Art		Palaeolithic Art			
			engravings	paintings	mobile art		parietal art	
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								

Adapted from Lewis-Williams and Dowson, 1988, pages 206 and 207

Fig 4.1 Samples of entoptic forms and examples of rock art interpreted as such

abstract art found in Ireland. That is not to say that due to its abstract nature complex meaning could not be deciphered by someone who understood the cultural conventions dictating the interpretation of such abstract art forms. The fact that the same cup and ring motif is so widespread and with relatively little variation suggests that perhaps a common meaning was being represented (Bradley, 1997). It is also possible that instead of a common meaning that these similarities in form can be explained through collective or common experience. Entoptic patterns have been used to explain how people who engage in varied cultural practices can ultimately represent them in similar visual fashion (Waddell, 2010) *fig 4.1*. Any attempts however to discern symbolic meaning beyond this is highly speculative, as the meaning can be very culturally specific.

### **Analysis: 5**

Pluais na Scriobh is an unusual site that at first glance would seem to have no parallel in Ireland but as we have seen there are many contexts and models through which we can compare and analyse it. The method through which the stone is marked, by cutting rather than pecking gives us several comparative examples. Tinure in Co. Louth uses a similar technique to achieve a similar affect and motif. The location of other inscribed surfaces in Boulder- shelter contexts in the surrounding region has led Shee Twohig to declare this a regional phenomenon within a broader sample of incised art. The shape and form of the linear motif as we have seen can also be compared with examples of definite cup and ring type in Co. Donegal, although these are not incised the visual similarity cannot be ignored. The setting and location of the site can almost entirely rule out the possibility that this is an example of medieval sword markings, whilst the relatively small number of individual motif types used can perhaps be seen as a indication that this site is not a composite of traditions such as the rock at Clonfinlough Co, Offaly.

By looking at its setting within the landscape we can see that the choice of such a remote and distinctive location can be interpreted as having a spiritual or ritual significance and the position of the carved surface hidden within a Boulder shelter can be seen as perhaps an attempt to limit access

to the site similarly to certain examples of megalithic art. It is still not possible to conclusively establish a chronology for this site but bearing in mind all that has been said I feel that a prehistoric explanation is best suited to Pluais na Scriobh but further and more direct research is needed to draw any solid conclusions. In the case of rock art in general it is not clear at what point the understanding of its significance was lost. O'Connor's excavations have shown us that certain sites may have been used over many centuries and it is very difficult without excavation to establish any kind of chronology of use.

Further investigation is needed to advance our understanding of Pluais na Scriobh and I believe that the connections raised here between it and other similar sites warrants such an investigation. In general the study of Irish rock art, with several notable exceptions, has not been the focus of much recent investigation. The potential of what might be gained through such work is great, and these sites are crying out for the attention of Irish archaeologists. Internationally ideas about Rock art are changing all the time. New discoveries here and in Europe frequently add more information and new interpretations to the field all the time.

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