

PROPPED STONES IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES

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Abstract

This short paper describes a number of propped stones recently recorded near Bostadh on Great Bernera, in the Outer Hebrides, and relates them to very similar features in diverse parts of England, Wales and Ireland. This report is essentially a segment of ongoing fieldwork and the intention is to promote greater awareness and discussion of these ambiguous and widespread megalithic structures.

Introduction

Propped stones are large slabs or boulders delicately elevated with apparent insecurity. They have been noted in Cornwall, Pembrokeshire, Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Cumbria and County Cavan. (Blackman, T, 2011, Burns, G, Nolan, J, 2017, Darvill, T, and Wainwright, G, 2016, Herring, P, 1997, Jones, A M, and Goskar, T, 2017, Shepherd, D, 2010, 2013, 2018a,b,c, Tilley, C.,1996.). The apparent distribution covers an area some 1000km north to south and around 500km east to west. Over thirty examples are known to date and they have been successfully differentiated from natural features and events such as outcomes of periglacial slope failure and glacial erratics. There are similar structures in Karelia, northern Russia (Shahkhovich M, Mizin V.pers comms)

For brevity Figs 1, 2 and 3 may serve to indicate typical examples, although the reader is urged to consult the references provided for a more complete view.

Fig 1: Golden Stones <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=49803>



Above Todmorden on the Lancashire/West Yorkshire border, in the South Pennines. The raised stone is the uppermost element of a heavily eroded outcrop of Lower Kinderscout Grit, a Carboniferous sandstone. It has been elevated in situ and the propping stone is placed on the edge of the underlying rock. There was no active ice in this area during the last glaciation. Height 1m, length 3.5m, width 1.5m.

Fig 2: Sleights Pasture <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=50009>



Above Chapel-le-Dale, between Ingleborough and Wharfedale, in North Yorkshire. A series of boulders has been ice-plucked from a low, limestone scar and moved some 10m. This one has been propped up and the principal propping stone is itself supported in place by a smaller rock. This, and other nearby examples, have been successfully distinguished from the numerous glacial erratics in the area, which identifiable till trapped beneath and much greater erosion shadows (Shepherd 2013).

Fig 3: Leskernick <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=46474>



On Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. This imposing granite slab originally formed part of the bedrock on which it has been placed. Additionally the bedrock itself has been undercut and supported. Again, this area was not subject to moving ice in the last glaciation.

Details of many examples have also been placed on Megalithic Portal <https://www.megalithic.co.uk> – a search for the text 'propped stone' will bring up the images.

Great Bernera, Harris

The present writer was advised of a propped stone above Bostadh, on the north-east coast of Great Bernera, Harris, on the broad ridge running south-east towards to Tobson (J. Billingsley pers comm), and a fortunate misunderstanding of the directions led to a close examination of Carnan Gibbegeo where four propped stones were found amongst a much larger number of natural erratics across the plateau, all were composed of Lewisian gneiss and appearing to be locally derived erratics, excepting SC1 (see below) which may have been deliberately obtained from the outcrop on which it is placed. A structured fieldwalk was carried out at each feature (30m radius) and there were no surface finds.

Fig 4: CG1: NB1365 3911 <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=52989>



A rough cuboid, 70cm x 110cm x 80cm, with two props.

Fig 5: CG2: NB1365 3913 <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=52990>

A rather triangular boulder, 40cm x 120cm x 110cm, with one large prop that is itself supported by a small cube of red stone – this last resembled a coarse red sandstone at first glance but is more likely to be a granite. This ‘propped prop’ detail has also been noted in the Chew valley in Derbyshire, on the flank of Ingleborough in the Yorkshire Dales, and as part of a feature at the head of the Rydal valley in Cumbria



Fig 6: CG3: NB1383 3932 <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=52991>



A large boulder, 130cm x 130cm x 70cm, with one prop, a small slab placed on edge. Spectacularly sited at the break of slope leading down to Loch a Sgail.

Fig 7: CG4: NB1384 3932 <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=52992>

Some 15m southwest of CG3 on the loch-facing slope, 55cm x 200cm x 90cm. A tilted slab propped by a red stone akin to CG2. No similar coloured stones were found on the plateau. Indeed, there was no observable till save for the local erratics on the bedrock.

On Stiogha Chnap the original feature was, eventually, perfectly obvious.



Fig 8: SC1: NB13715 39472. <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=52993>



The feature to which the writer had originally been directed. A wedge-shaped slab tapering 50cm to 5cm, 200cm x 330cm. A very imposing lunular shape with two props, the smaller being a mass of mineral including a large amount of rose quartz very similar in hue to the props at CG2 and 4. 'Dot's Stone', on West Penwith, Cornwall, (SW42692 36165) is a substantial block elevated by a similar cobble consisting essentially of a mass of mineral – with no similar stones being evident within a 200m radius.





The thinner edge of the slab is deckled as if there have been several percussive removals, and it does ring when struck – this is very similar to a feature at the head of the Rydal valley in Cumbria.

Interestingly there were several cattle leg bones beneath the slab, all showing signs of wear, which were ideal for striking the slab. This seems to be a rather unique example of a prehistoric feature still in use.



Fig 9: SC2: NB1370 3947 <https://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=52994>



20m northwest of SC1, 60cm x 100cm x 60cm. One point of contact and one pebble prop, with the raised end directed toward SC1.

These notes represent one field visit on one day and further analysis is needed as there may well be other examples in the area. Much may also be learned from the landscape context and the contrasting viewsheds of the stones. For example SC1 has a commanding position looking west across to Bhaltos, north to Little Bernera and on out into the Atlantic, whilst CG3 has a much more



confined skyline and looms over Loch a Sgail and the valley linking Bostadh and Tobson. The former is easily visible from a wide arc of land and sea whilst the latter has a much more confined, local presence.

Discussion

There is no dating evidence for any of the propped stones so far recorded but consultations with others (R. Bradley, V. Cummings, A. Jones, T. Blackman and P. Herring pers comms) do lead to the tentative interpretation that they form a part of the Neolithic megalithic tradition, and readers are encouraged to consider this, especially in the light of the emerging account (from aDNA studies) of diverse Neolithic arrivals in the British Isles.

Darvill and Wainwright (2016) offer the possibility of an evolution in design from 'simple' propped stones to more elaborate dolmens, but allow that there is nothing yet to substantiate such a progression of design.

Cummings and Richards (2014) suggest that propped stones, or the activity of elevating selected stones, need not necessarily have antecedents in mainland Europe. One tentative conclusion might be that such subtle interventions in the encountered landscape are, in a sense, an announcement of arrival/possession, in the prominence of features such as Leskernick, Stiogha Chnap 1 and Golden Stones, a demonstration of skill and preparedness for risk-taking in the delicacy of placements, such as at Sleights Pasture, Carnan Gibegeo 3 and Golden Stones.

One obvious question is: who is the demonstration intended to communicate with? Or, is the action of raising a stone complete in itself – memorialising for the local community the sum of its efforts? Yet, other propped stones are less obvious, more subtle in their settings. There are examples where particular stones have been selected as props, surely indicating a familiarity with (what we would term) local geology. Equally there may be an indication of selection with some raised stones being well-defined slabs, perhaps resembling stylised/symbolic deadfall traps, whilst others are large, rotund boulders approaching the appearance of Irish 'boulder burials' and rudimentary dolmens.

The distribution of known propped stones is merely an opportunity sample and there are, consequently, few defensible inferences to be drawn, save that some locations might relate to the western strand of Neolithic advance northwards up the west coast of mainland Britain and rivers leading upstream from the more prominent estuaries. The Irish and Hebridean examples require a more elaborate and informed model.

On Harris, as elsewhere, the direction of propping and the orientation of the raised stone does not correspond to significant solar and lunar horizon events, nor to any prominent features in the immediate landscape. Herring (1997) has argued for a solar horizon event in respect of the 'window' provided by the propped stone at Leskernick on Bodmin Moor, but this would so far seem to be an exception. The import of a propped stone appears to be more connected to the feature itself, its creation and its materiality. Clearly it would be premature to proffer a provisional typology, but fieldwork is continuing.

The essential question of what is being demonstrated to whom remains unanswered at present. It is inappropriate to offer further theorising at this stage but details of further examples would be most welcome.

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