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**Cup-marked stones from the Gloucestershire Cotswolds**

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## CUP-MARKED STONES FROM THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE COTSWOLDS

The purpose of this note is to report two recent finds of cup-marked stones from the northern Cotswolds, and to discuss in general terms the four examples known at present, in terms of their morphology, associations, and coherence as a group.

Two cup-marked stones have been reported in previous publications. The first is a columnar cup-marked block of limestone from an early excavation at King's Beeches on Cleeve Hill, Southam (Marshall 1978, fig. 2). Although this bears a cup-shaped depression it is of doubtful attribution to the non-domestic tradition of cup-marked stones seen in northern Britain during the prehistoric period (Morris 1981). It is of columnar form, in contrast to the rectangular block characteristic of the mobiliary group of cup-marked stones of non-domestic type, and appears to be from an area producing evidence for iron age settlement. There is, however, no proven association for the stone, and nothing to suggest an overtly domestic function.

The second cup-marked stone was discovered as a surface find during survey work undertaken by the Cotswold Archaeological Research Group on Nottingham Hill, Gotherington (Marshall and Morris 1983: as an addendum to that paper it should be noted that this stone is now in the Corinium Museum, Cirencester). This stone bears ring-markings in addition to one main and one subsidiary cup, and is of a type entirely consistent with the mobiliary form of cup- and ring-marked stone from northern Britain (Morris 1981).

Since that date two further cup-marked stones have been recognized, reported by land-owners on whose properties further field-survey was taking place.

### *Rook Pool, Swell (SP 1334 2812)*

This cup-marked stone was recovered by an employee of the landowner (Mr Mann, Fox Farm, Condicote) as a surface find during ploughing in 1981. The area is on a gentle slope at approximately 186 m OD, forming part of a head-water valley of the river Eye, a tributary of the Windrush. The area is located at the base of the Great Oolite, an important spring-line, and although in a dry valley the field contains an area of natural seepage and overlooks in the valley bottom a shallow natural pool, which appears to have formed an important local water supply influencing the distribution of later prehistoric and Roman settlement (RCHM 1976; Marshall, unpublished data).

The stone itself (FIG. 4) is a block of Great Oolitic limestone heavily channelled by fossil worm-casts, and of a lithography entirely local to the area. Many closely comparable fragments of limestone appear within a kilometre or so of the find-spot. In size it is approximately 340 x 250 mm on the upper cup-marked surface, and the irregularly rectangular block is approximately 170 mm deep. The top alone appears smoother than the rest of the block, possibly the result of smoothing of the natural surface, and contains a single cup-shaped depression cut asymmetrically

at one end. This depression is smoothly rounded, with no sign of abrasion relevant to discussions of use, measures some 140 mm across at the top and is 50 mm deep.

The stone rests approximately level when set down, and is similar in this respect to the Nottingham Hill example (Marshall 1983). Close examination of the entire surface of the stone revealed no other non-natural features. The stone remains the property of Mr Mann and is kept at Fox Farm, Condicote.

#### *Oxpens, Yanworth (SP 0870 1387)*

The existence of this stone was reported by Mr Tim Owen, estate manager to Lord Vestey at Stowell Park Estate, Yanworth. It had been dislodged in 1982 during ploughing and then removed to the margins of cultivation, from where it was ultimately taken to the gardens of Stowell Park House. The stone was seen soon after discovery by Mr Owen, and the exact location and circumstances of the discovery are known. The area of the find is located at the base of the Great Oolite, an important spring-line, on the upper westerly-facing slope of a head-water valley of the river Coln, at approximately 183 m OD.

The stone (FIG. 5) is far larger than the other examples found so far, and differs from them since it contains two cup-marks on its upper surface. It consists of banded, shelly limestone from the Inferior Oolitic series, and as with the other examples appears to be of entirely local origin. The block is approximately 1.2 m long and 0.6 m wide at the top, which is broadly ovate in shape. In longitudinal section it is asymmetrically curved and 0.4 m deep in the centre, from where it tapers in thickness to the ends. In transverse section it is roughly D-shaped.

The entire block appears to have been roughly dressed by repeated impacts from a maul. Such treatment is clearly visible over the curved back of the stone, which is covered almost entirely by clear, shallow pitting (FIG. 5: underside views). The upper surface appears gently curved along its length and contains two cup-shaped depressions set towards each end. These depressions are comparable in size, being approximately 150 mm across at the top and 50 mm deep.

When resting naturally on a flat surface, the upper surface of the stone slopes gently along its length since the curve of the back is slightly asymmetrical. It will, however, rest stably in an approximately horizontal position. Many cup-marked surfaces on natural rock outcrops in northern Britain are also approximately horizontal.

Repeated plough-scoring across the short axis of the upper surface suggests that before displacement by the plough this stone may have been resting with its cup-marked surface uppermost, and less than a foot from the surface, but whether it was *in situ* is not known.

The stone remains at Stowell Park House and is the property of Lord Vestey.

#### *Discussion*

Now that several examples are known, it is possible to assess their significance and associations in a preliminary way, although the unstratified nature of the stones, the absence of positive dating evidence, and the lack of features which can clearly define their function make this problematic.

It must be stressed that utilitarian production of cup-shaped depressions in free blocks of stone can occur at any period. Those of inferred ritual function in northern Britain and Scotland have been dated in use and fabrication to between pre-3000 BC and AD 100, but most often between 2000 and 1600 BC (Morris 1981). They occur there in similar forms, with or without rings and other features in addition to the cups, on natural rock surfaces, on megalithic blocks from chambered tombs, cists, and standing stones, and on small portable blocks.

The presence of rings in addition to the cups on the Nottingham Hill example suggests a clear link with this cup- and ring-marked tradition in northern Britain. The attribution of the other three stones is far less clear since they have no ring-marks, and apart from the Rook Pool example

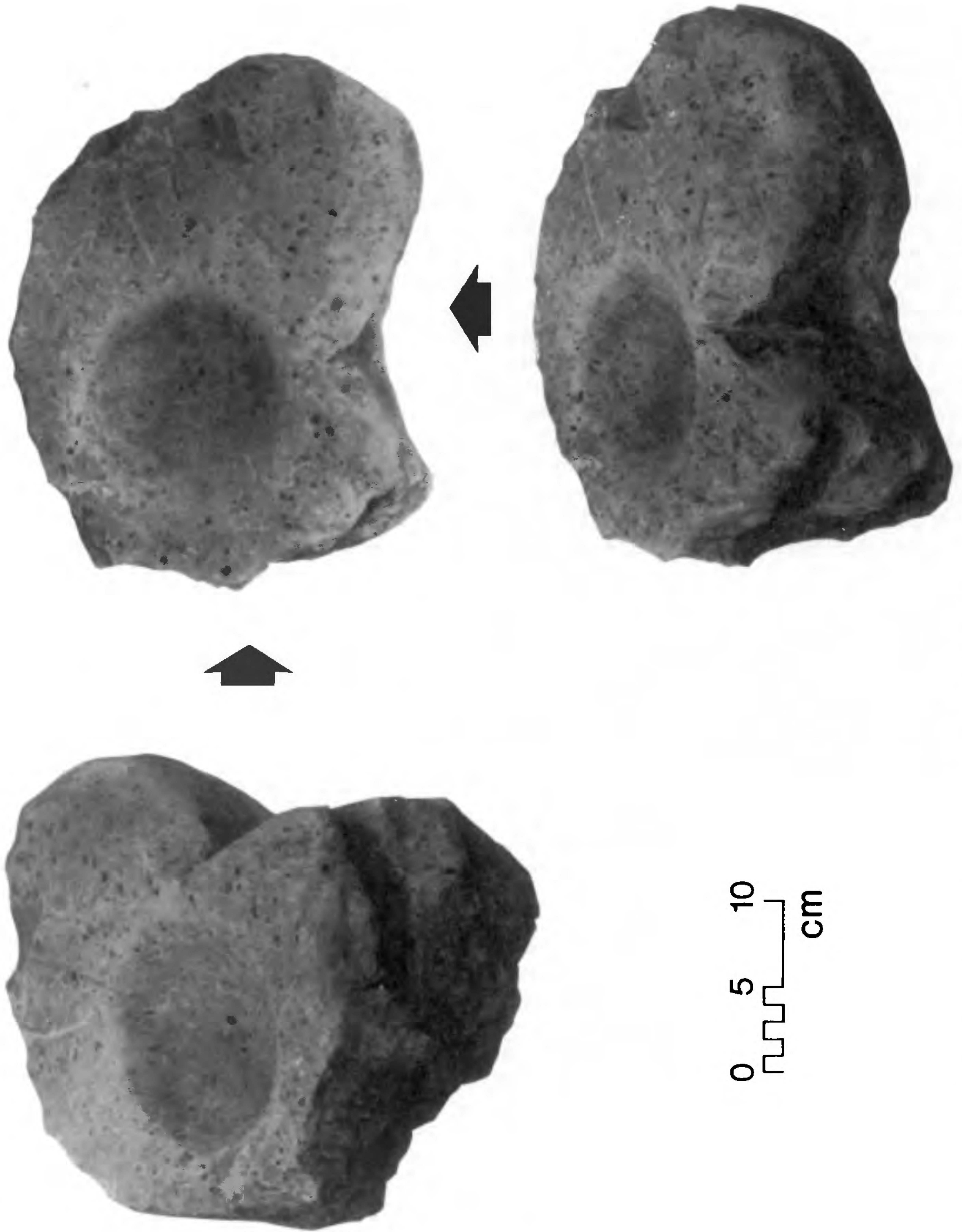


FIG. 4 The cup-marked stone from Rook Pool, Swell. A view of the upper cup-marked surface is related to lateral/oblique views by the arrows shown.

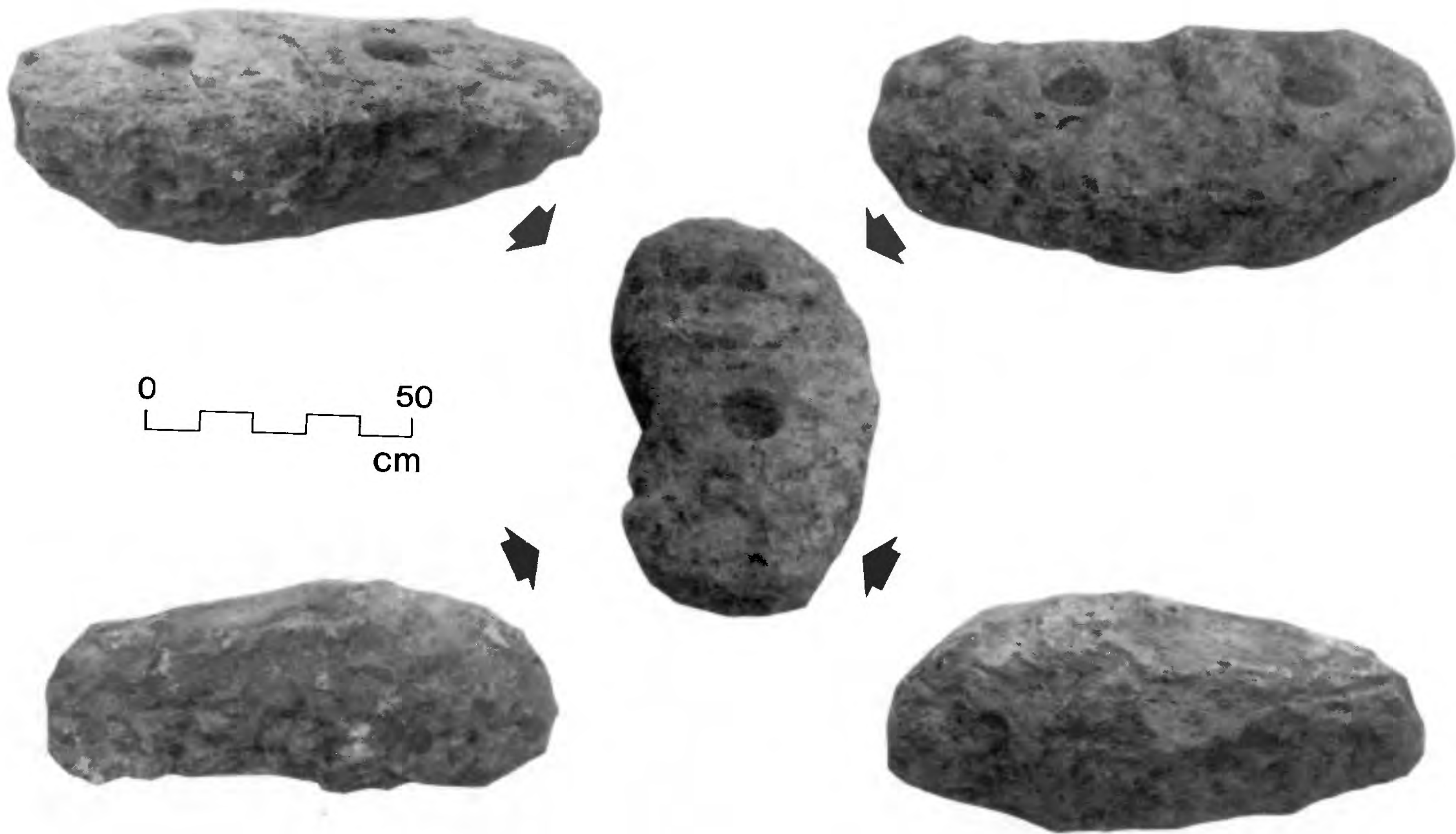


FIG. 5 The cup-marked stone from Oxpens, Yanworth. An oblique view of the upper cup-marked surface is related to oblique/lateral views by the arrows shown.

are not of the typical rectangular block shape characteristic of the mobiliary form of the northern cup-marked tradition. The King's Beeches example is columnar, and the Yanworth example is boat-shaped and far larger. One factor does, however, remain remarkably similar between all stones so far found, the size of the cup (Table 1). Whether this similarity arises from functional, cultural, or coincidental reasons is not known, but it should be noted that it does fall well within the range of the most typical sizes found on stones from the cup-marked tradition from northern Britain.

*Table 1* Summary of cup-marked stones: morphology and location

<i>Example</i>	<i>NGR</i>	<i>Parish</i>	<i>Alt m</i>	<i>Asp</i>	<i>Geol</i>	<i>Sett</i>	<i>Cups</i>	<i>Cup diam mm</i>	<i>Cup depth mm</i>	<i>Block size mm</i>	<i>Block depth mm</i>
King's Beeches	SO986268	Southam	244	NW	Basal Inferior Oolite	?	1	180	60	280 × 290	430
Nottingham Hill	SO98752825	Gotherington	244	NE	Basal Great Oolite	G2	1	160	50	300 × 300	110
Rook Pool	SP13342812	Swell	186	NW	Basal Great Oolite	G3 G2	1	140	50	340 × 250	170
Oxpens	SP08701387	Yanworth	186	W	Basal Great Oolite	G3	2	150	50	1200 × 600	400

*Key*

Column 4 Altitude OD

Column 5 General orientation of the slope on which the find was made

Column 7 Flint scatter of stated grade within 1 km (Marshall 1985)

Column 8 Number of cups present

In contrast to the areas of northern Britain where cup-marks with or without rings regularly appear on both natural and megalithic surfaces (Morris 1981), the cup-mark tradition in the Cotswolds appears on present evidence to be restricted to the mobiliary form. Natural surfaces of limestone are friable and are unlikely to preserve any unprotected surface relief sufficiently long for it to have survived from the prehistoric period. No tradition of decorating megalithic structures with cup-motifs has been detected in the Cotswolds, although a line of multiple cup-marks has been found on a structural stone associated with the chambered tomb at Arthur's Stone, Dorstone, Hereford and Worcester (Daniel 1950). The only other example of tomb decoration known within the immediate periphery of the Cotswolds is a single example from the Mendips (Grinsell 1957).

The Yanworth example suggests the existence of a much larger element in the group and, although the cup-size is similar to the smaller examples, it has two cups. In contrast to the smaller examples, which can be lifted easily, the Oxpens stone requires several people to manoeuvre it with difficulty. In common with the other examples, however, it appears to have been shaped for free-standing on, or partially embedded in, the ground surface with the upper surface horizontal. In size it is certainly comparable with many of the components of megalithic tombs in the area and may well suggest a link between cup-marking and megalithic architecture similar to that seen over much of northern Britain. The immediate area of the find was searched thoroughly and relevant questions asked on the estate, but no further stone-work debris was seen during discovery and none was visible over the find-spot. The general appearance of the stone does not

suggest a megalithic upright or cap-stone, and all evidence available suggests that it was non-architectural.

The topographical locations of these cup-marked stones show many features in common; they appear on the mid-upper slopes of stream valleys, in positions marginal to adjacent spurs (Table 1). In common with examples from northern Britain they occur in open upland areas. Since the examples are all unstratified, any discussion of archaeological associations is difficult. The King's Beeches example came from an area which produced evidence for iron age settlement. The Nottingham Hill stone came from within a multivallate hillfort, which has produced evidence for settlement and activity of bronze age to iron age date. The Rook Pool stone was found near but outside the margin of a dense scatter of flint (Marshall, unpublished data) and also overlooked an area producing evidence for later iron age and Roman settlement. The Yanworth example came from a spur which has produced no evidence for settlement in the immediate area.

It seems at present that in general terms cup-marked stones from the Cotswolds, although possessing similar features, do not comprise a closely uniform group of objects. It is not even known whether they are temporally or functionally related. At least one example has clear affinities with the northern tradition of cup-marked stones, with its ritual associations, since it has the characteristic ring motif. The others, however, cannot be linked to this tradition with equal confidence, because although they are similar in size and shape to the mobiliary element of the northern group they possess no further diagnostic characteristics such as rings. The Cotswold group may contain elements of unrelated and entirely domestic origin, although in the case of the Yanworth example, which is a far larger object than that required to contain two cup-like depressions, this appears less likely.

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