

A stone head from Port Appin, Argyll

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ABSTRACT

A recently discovered carving of a human head on a natural boulder is described and related to the range of pagan Celtic stone heads found in Britain and Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

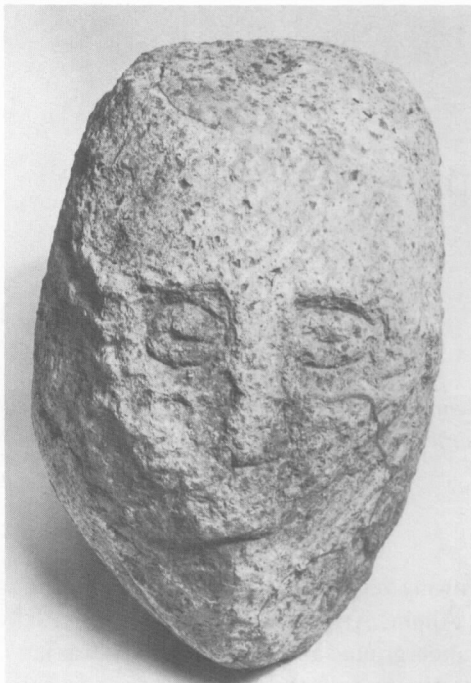
In April 1982, while preparing ground for growing vegetables, Mr W Breckenridge dug up a sizeable boulder in his garden at Dunsleigh, Port Appin, Argyll (NGR: NM 909 456). After the removal of the boulder, which lay some 'three feet underground among tree roots', it was left on top of a pile of similarly sized stones for several weeks and it was only after rain had washed off the earth that, to the finder's surprise, carved facial features were revealed on its surface. Shortly afterwards, Mr and Mrs Breckenridge notified the National Museum of their find, and were informed by the writer of its likely significance. Subsequent inspection of the site failed to reveal any relevant features. This brief descriptive account is offered to draw attention to the stone, which remains in the care of the finders.

DESCRIPTION

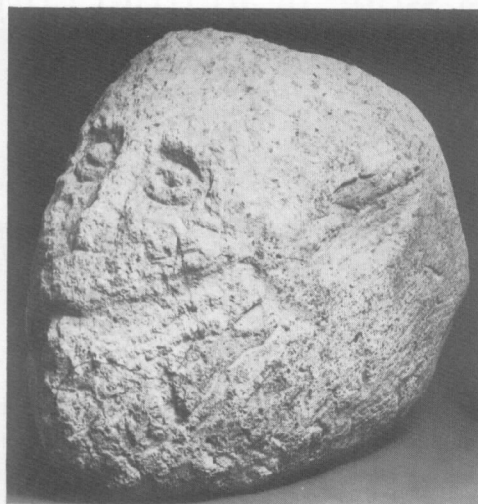
The carved facial features occupy the broad end of a glacial erratic boulder, c 35 cm in height. The rock has very kindly been identified by Mr Ewan Campbell, University College, Cardiff, as a porphyritic microdiorite, matching specimens from the Lower Old Red Sandstone igneous complex of Glencoe, and is thus likely to be of fairly local derivation. Seen from above, the boulder is irregularly pear-shaped and has maximum dimensions of 37 cm and 26 cm. The boulder stands firm and level on its base, a naturally dished area c 24 cm by 18 cm. It weighs very nearly 50 kg.

The area of the boulder occupied by the face appears to have been prepared for the reception of the features by removal of the smooth weathered surface over a considerable area. The limits of the main sculpted area are delineated by an irregular channel seen most clearly on the left side of the face. Curving grooves, noticeable particularly above the eyebrows, also appear to reflect work carried out prior to the carving of the face (illus 1). The features are most striking when viewed face-on, although the expression changes depending on the angle of the observer's view-point. The right eye, c 40 mm by 35 mm, is defined by an oval channel, while a central horizontal gouge marks the pupil. The left eye is similar, though it is slightly smaller at c 40 mm by 30 mm and the pupil is less strikingly defined. Differential weathering and the method of sculpting have left the nose in striking relief: grey-white in colour in contrast to the pinkish tones of the surrounding features, and up to 5 mm proud of the

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ILLUS 1 Stone head from Port Appin, Argyll. Total height of head c 35 cm



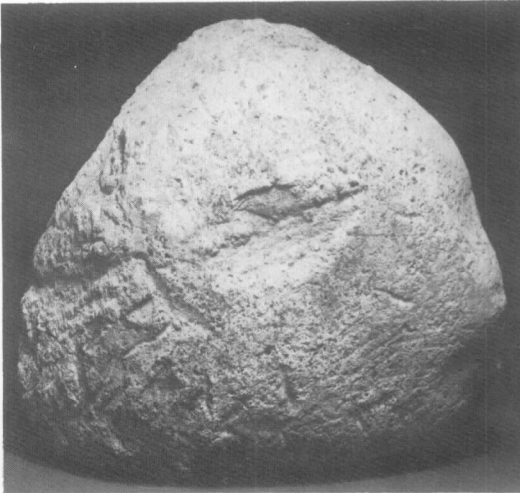
ILLUS 2 The head viewed obliquely from the left

surrounding surface which has been chiselled or hammered away; the nose is also defined by a channelled line (best seen in illus 2). The length of the nose is 10 cm. The mouth consists of a simple depression, though a flake of stone may have been accidentally detached subsequently on the right side in such a way as to alter the expression. The upper lip is pronounced, when viewed face-on, and that viewpoint also tends to suggest more tapered angular features than the rather squat face seen from other angles (compare illus 1 and 2). The removal of an area of stone 10 cm by 7 cm to the left of the face (see illus 3) has resulted in a superficial impression of an ear but is not certainly deliberate, and there is no corresponding feature on the opposite side, represented by the nearly sheer, unworked original weathered surface (seen in illus 4). That view also illustrates the thin line of iron concretion deposited as a dark brown line around much of the facial area, and clearly reflecting the position of the stone as it lay in the ground prior to discovery.

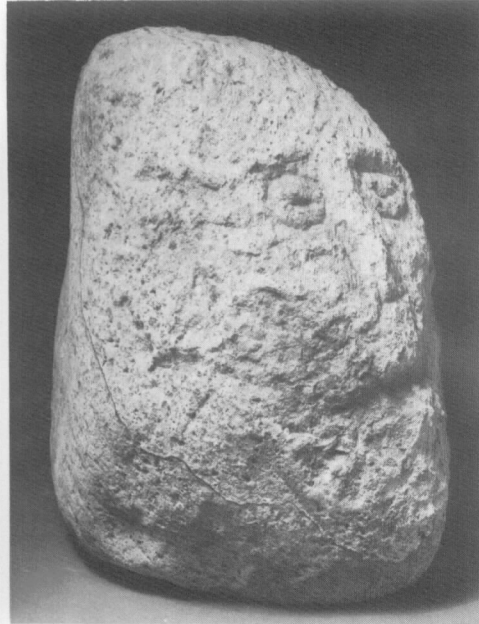
Finally, mention may be made of some indistinct marks on the neck/chin area of the stone head: a series of poorly defined oblique grooves mostly no more than 2 cm long appear to form a crude criss-cross pattern on the rounded area of the boulder to the left side of the face (illus 3): there is the strong possibility that the depiction of facial hair, or less likely, clothing or some form of ornament, was intended by the sculptor (compare, for example, a bearded stone head from Corbridge, Northumberland (Ross 1967, 85, pl 28a)).

CONCLUSIONS

The depiction of the human head using a natural boulder as a medium, and the form of treatment of the facial features (particularly the eyes and nose) combine to suggest that the Port



ILLUS 3 Side view of the head from the left



ILLUS 4 The head viewed obliquely from the right

Appin head is closely related to the range of pagan Celtic stone heads found in Britain and Ireland (see Ross 1961, *passim*; 1967, 61–126 for full discussion). Although the first such head found in Argyll, the Port Appin find is the second important piece of ‘cult’ evidence from this area of Scotland, for only some 20 km to the north-east lies the site of the discovery of the well-known ‘Ballachulish idol’, the wooden figure of a female found under what may have been the remains of its associated wickerwork shrine (Christison 1881, 160–2; Ross 1967, 40).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due firstly to Mr and Mrs W Breckenridge for reporting their discovery and for making the head readily available for study. While it was in museum care, the stone was kindly identified by Mr Ewan Campbell, University College, Cardiff. It is hoped that fuller discussion of the head’s significance will be undertaken by Dr Anne Ross who was unfortunately prevented by illness from visiting Edinburgh while the stone was on loan to the National Museum; she has meantime kindly offered some provisional comments on the find, although the responsibility for any observations made in this note rests with the writer. Finally, I am grateful to Dr Graham Ritchie for commenting upon the text, to Ian Lerner and Doreen Moyes of the RMS for the photographs that accompany it, and to Miss B Curran for her typing.

REFERENCES

- Christison, R 1881 ‘On an ancient wooden image, found in November last at Ballachulish peat-moss’, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 15 (1880–1), 158–78.
 Ross, Anne 1961 ‘The human head in insular pagan Celtic religion’, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 91 (1957–8), 10–43.
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