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Investigating three Cornish megalithic quoits

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Background

The megalithic monuments of Cornwall, with their awe inspiring capstones, represent some of the most iconic archaeological sites in south west Britain. Despite this, much of what we know about them is drawn from antiquarian accounts, which produced little in the way of material culture and or human remains (for example, Borlase 1769; Borlase 1872), and there have been few excavations since the work undertaken by Charles Thomas and Bernard Wailes in the 1960s at Sperris Quoit and Zennor Quoit (Thomas and Wailes 1967). Indeed, until the dating of archived samples from the Sperris and Zennor sites in the 2000s there was no secure dating to show that they were of Neolithic origin (Kytmannow 2008).

In recent years, however, Cornwall Archaeological Unit has been involved with archaeological excavations at three large megalithic monuments or 'quoits'. Carwynnen Quoit, Trethevy Quoit and Hendraburnick 'Quoit'. The colloquial term quoit implies that they fall into the same category of monument, however, despite some similarities, there are major differences between them.

A commonalty of these sites is that they are located in what would now be considered to be marginal land (Fig 1.1), and all three sites are comprised of distinctive large stones. Here, however, the similarities begin to breakdown. Trethevy Quoit (Chapter 3) and Carwynnen Quoit (Chapter 2) both fall within the broad typology of chamber tomb (cf Barnatt 1982, 37-52), which based on dating evidence from Wales and Ireland date to the Early Neolithic. Trethevy is a fine example of a portal dolmen, a type most commonly found in Ireland and west Wales. Carwynnen, may belong to this type too, but like the majority of Cornish chamber tombs it has been disturbed and re-erected on previous occasions, and consequently it may belong to a simpler form.

The third site, Hendraburnick Quoit is very different again. Although recorded as a collapsed quoit in the past, investigations revealed that it more comfortably fits within the more amorphous category of 'sub-megalithic' or 'propped stone' monuments (Blackman 2011; Farnworth *et al* 2023; Chapter 4), where a distinctive stone is raised up on supporting stones, or in this case upon a slate platform. Dating has been difficult to establish for these monuments, and it is possible that they cannot be tied to the same particular period within the Neolithic or Bronze Age. The relationship between a long cairn, a propped stone at Leskernick and the rising Midsummer sun, for example, may be suggestive of Early Neolithic date (Herring 1997), whereas Hendraburnick 'Quoit' has been shown to have later Neolithic origins (Chapter 4). The ruinous nature of many of the megalithic chamber tombs and the lack of any secure dating for the smaller sub megalithic and propped stones highlight the dangers of trying to force them into rigid typologies.

Of the three investigated sites, two were smaller-scale, at Hendraburnick 'Quoit' test pits were spaced around the perimeter of the 'Quoit' and a second fallen stone. At Trethevy Quoit test pits were focussed on a geophysical anomaly on the east side of the monument as well as other anomalies across the wider field. By contrast, the excavation at Carwynnen Quoit involved the wholescale excavation of the chamber area, prior to the re-erection of the stones comprising the monument.

In spite of the varying scale of recording, these programmes of archaeological investigation have proven to be significant as they have led to the recovery of valuable new information about Cornish megaliths. Carwynnen Quoit was confirmed to be a megalithic tomb of Early Neolithic date, which was re-used during subsequent periods. Trethevy Quoit was found to have been purposely constructed from carefully selected stones, which were set upon a previously unknown platform of greenstones (Fig 1.2). Lastly, investigations at Hendraburnick 'Quoit' revealed that it was of later Neolithic/Chalcolithic

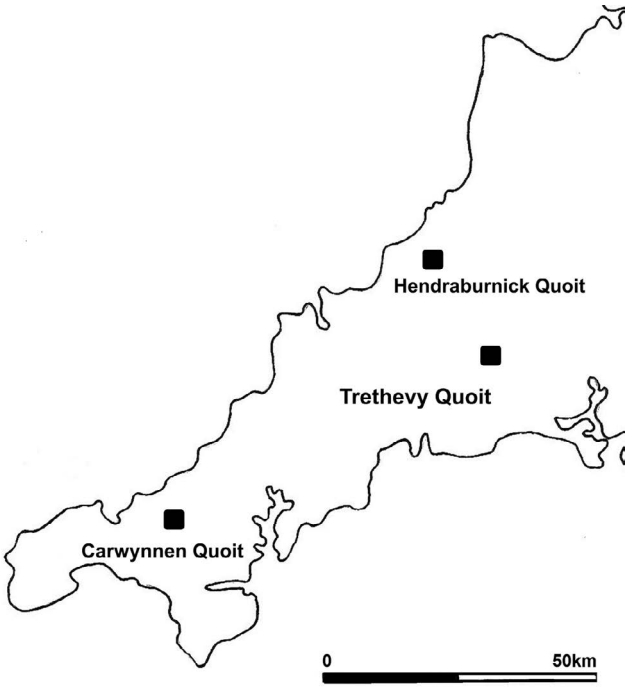

Figure 1.1: Map showing the location of the excavated quoits (Squares).

Figure 1.2: Trethevy Quoit reconstructed. (Painting: Freya Lawson-Jones.)

construction but that it incorporated earlier rock art and continued to be the focus for depositional acts during the Early Bronze Age and potentially beyond.

This volume

Following on from this introductory chapter, the remainder of the monograph is divided into four chapters, three of which deal with the individual investigated 'quoits' and the fourth provides an overview. The first chapter is concerned with Carwynnen Quoit, a chamber tomb which has had a major project to reconstruct it after collapsing in the 1960s. This is followed by Trethevy, one of the finest portal dolmens in Britain. The chapter on this site has appeared in *Cornish Archaeology*, however it has been updated for republication in this volume, where it will hopefully reach a wider audience. This is followed by a chapter on the enigmatic site Hendraburnick Quoit, which until recently has seen debate as to whether it was a 'constructed' monument. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a brief overview of the evidence from the recent excavations.

Given the range of monuments included and the detailed specialist work which has been undertaken on each site, the individual excavations are presented as self-contained pieces which can be read as entirely separate, free-standing contributions. Each of the three site chapters commences with the background to the investigations followed by stratigraphical results from the investigations. The stratigraphy is followed by successive specialist contributions, which include the artefacts, the environmental analysis and radiocarbon dating. Each chapter concludes with a discursive section which draws together the results from the excavated monument.

Radiocarbon dating

All samples were submitted for accelerator mass spectrometry dating (AMS). The radiocarbon dating was undertaken by the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) at Glasgow.

The calibration of the results has been performed using the programme OxCal v4.4.4 (www.flaha.ox.ac.uk/) and date ranges have been calibrated using the IntCal20 atmospheric calibration curve (Reimer *et al* 2020). Unless stated otherwise, the 95 per cent level of probability (Mook 1986) has been used throughout the monograph; calibrated determinations cited in the text may therefore differ from older published sources.

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