
7 Megalithic Art on the Ferndale Slab

by *G MacGregor*

One of the stones packing the cist slab (004) showed indications of decoration on its surface (*Illus 5*) during excavation and was retained and brought to Glasgow for closer examination.

The piece is a sub-rectangular (probably) Orcadian sandstone slab, measuring up to 0.59m by 0.20m by 0.145m but with a pronounced prow. The slab shows scars along several edges where it has been roughly flaked to make it more rectangular in form and to emphasize the prow. The end opposite the prow has an area of diffuse picking which appears to relate to modifying the shape of the stone, as opposed to decoration.

Decoration is present on three of the stone's surfaces. On the upper face is a rectangle measuring 0.36m by 0.12m by 0.16m maximum depth. It may have been produced using a pick, analogous to area picking (*Shee 1973, 167*). On the opposite face to the picked surface are a series of 11 fine incised lines. They have the appearance of a roughly executed series of lozenges or triangles. The third element of decoration is located on the prow itself, where two broad incised lines, up to 0.145m by 0.05m wide, are present.

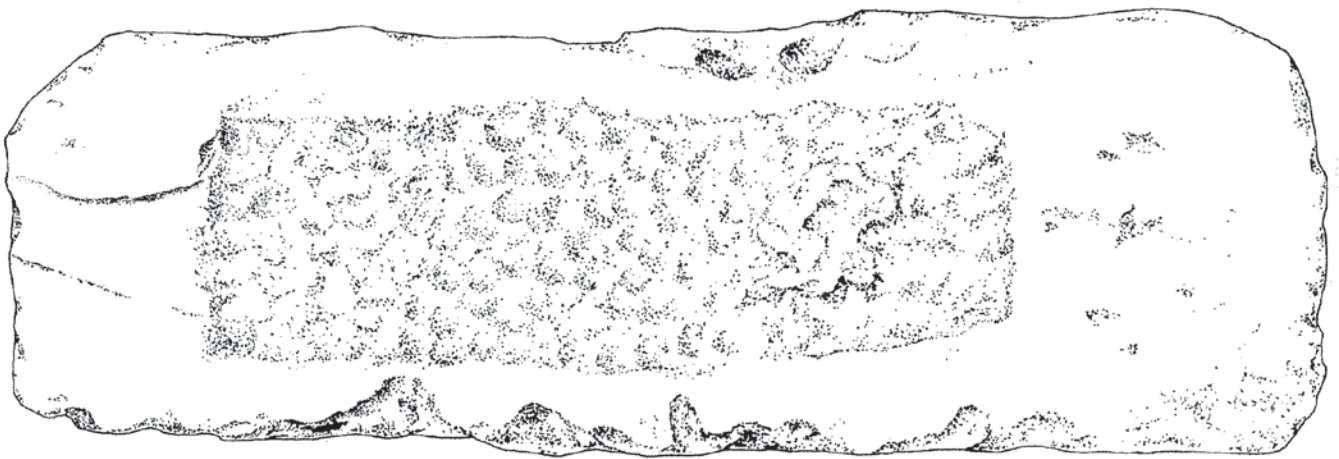
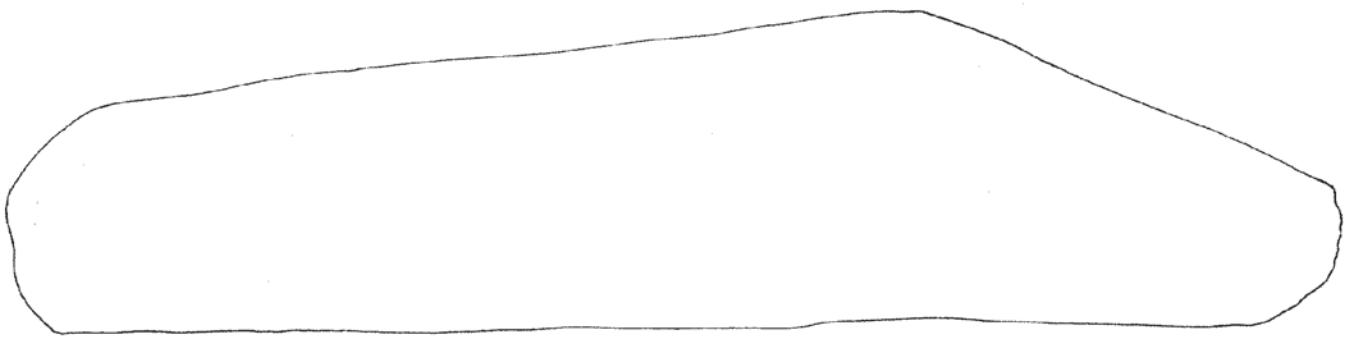
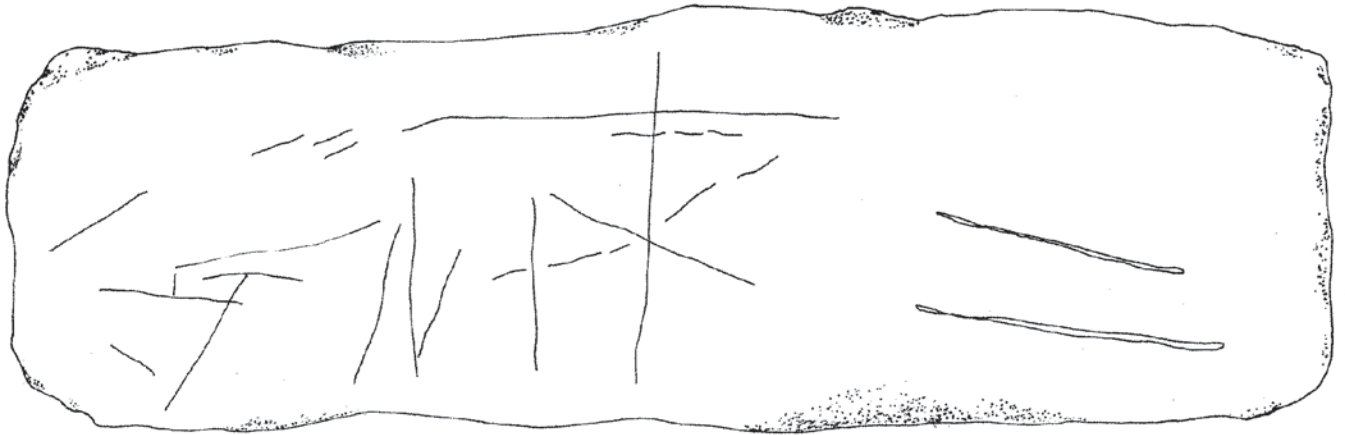
The picked rectangle appears to have been traced in outline first and then carved out but not completely finished, as there is a distinctly higher portion at one end. The picking appears relatively fresh in contrast to the fainter, perhaps more weathered incised decoration. It is possible that the incised decoration represents the earliest phase of decoration on the stone, and the pecking may be less weathered in appearance, as it had been undertaken shortly before the slab was utilized for packing the cist.

Both forms of decoration (incised lines and area

picking) are found in the tradition of 'megalithic art' (*Shee 1973; Eogan 1999*). The morphology of the incised decoration on the Ferndale slab can be readily paralleled with decorated stones incorporated at the settlements of Skara Brae (*Shepherd 2000*) and Barnhouse (*Richards 2003*) and is also found in the passage tomb at Maes Howe (*Bradley 1999*). As such, the Ferndale slab may once have been incorporated in a similar later Neolithic structure. The Ferndale slab is notable for having at least two phases of decoration on opposite sides of the stone, meaning that if it once was part of a structure, only one face would have been visible.

Also of note is the outer surface of the stone, which is a light brown colour, whereas the surface of the picked rectangle is a reddish colour. Although there is an increasing awareness that colour played a significant role in the past (*Jones & MacGregor 2002*), it is unclear in this case whether the differences were an incidental effect of picking or a meaningful element of production of the picked area.

The incorporation of decorated slabs or stones in the construction of the cist during the late third and early second millennia is well attested and recognized as often having a deliberate significance (*Bradley 1992*). The significance of the Ferndale slab is difficult to ascertain, but several possibilities are raised by its presence. Its incorporation in the packing stones for the cist could have been completely unintentional and unnoticed by the builders of the cist. Alternatively, it could represent the deliberate reuse of a decorated slab that had been taken from a later Neolithic settlement or passage tomb in the vicinity, evoking meanings relating to the particular site or locale of origin.



Illus 5 The decorated slab