

THE NAYLAND FIGURE-STONE.

BY NINA F. LAYARD, F.L.S.

Anthropologists have long been acquainted with the artistic skill of Palæolithic man as revealed in Continental cave-dwellings. The engravings on horn, bone, and stone, and the paintings on the rocky walls of his shelters, show him to have been an adept at portraying the animals that were his contemporaries. The ponderous strength of mammoth and bison is as faithfully delineated as the light activities of deer and goat, and though his attempts at the human figure are by no means so happy, still considerable light is thrown upon the appearance of our prehistoric ancestors by these somewhat crude representations.

M. Salomon Reinach, in his "Repertoire de l'Art Quaternaire," published in 1913, has provided a veritable picture gallery of the works of these early draughtsmen, and the study of this wonderful collection is both astonishing and fascinating.

As no example of this early art had hitherto been recognised in England, with the solitary instance of a horse's head scratched on bone from Creswell caves, Derbyshire, the finding of a Figure-Stone at Nayland, near Colchester, is of great importance.

In this case the engraving is on a quartzite pebble, and the subject is a spirited portrayal of a goat in the act of climbing.

In view of the unique value of this pioneer find, the story of its discovery and the vicissitudes through

which the stone passed before its true significance was recognised, may be worth recording.

A few years ago, when searching the fields at Nayland for worked flints, the Rev. J. D. Gray, who was at that time Vicar of the Parish, noticed a rolled quartzite pebble which in size and shape somewhat resembled a Neolithic celt. Closer inspection showed that the stone had not been fashioned by man, and it was thrown away. This might have very well ended the short history of the Nayland Figure-Stone, but afterwards, recollecting a rubbed appearance on its surface for which he could not account, Mr. Gray spent an hour in hunting over a wide area to recover the lost specimen. Happily, the search proved successful, and he added what he believed to be a prehistoric "rubber" to his collection. Later, when showing the stone to a friend, who rejected it because there was no sign of artificial work, he again determined to get rid of it, and for the second time the precious relic was in jeopardy. Only the timely arrival on the scene of another flint expert prevented the purpose being carried out, for Mr. Gray's impression that it might be a possible rubber-stone was now endorsed, and finally he decided to keep the much-discussed object.

For five years the stone lay hidden away, but its eventful career was not yet terminated.

Meanwhile Mr. Gray left Nayland and removed to St. Leonard's, where he became acquainted with Mr. Lewis Abbott, whose researches among the fissures of Ightham, and in the kitchen-middens in the neighbourhood of Hastings, are well known to the scientific world.

Not long since, when examining some pictures of

hollowed stones with Mr. Abbott, the fact that a somewhat similar depression had been noticed on his old favourite, resulted in the supposed "rubber" once more coming to light for further examination. From the depths of the geological cabinet it was placed in Mr. Abbott's hands, and by a happy chance the light, falling favourably, revealed some fine grooved lines which at once attracted his attention.

Fate was befriending the Nayland figure-stone when it was brought under the eye of one who was accustomed to scrutinize stone surfaces with exact attention, and to whom the modern "burin," or graver, was no stranger. Not only as a collector, but as a specialist in all that concerns gems, and the composition of stones, Mr. Abbott's experience was invaluable. When, therefore, he detected at a glance the meaning of the delicately executed lines scored on such an unlikely background as that of a quartzite pebble, we cannot fail to recognise that, but for the trained perceptive faculty of an expert, this valuable example of primitive art would have been lost to England.

The illustration which accompanies this article, is the latest and best of the photographs taken of the stone, and is here reproduced by permission of the two gentlemen already mentioned.

In order to obtain a satisfactory negative it was found necessary to lightly trace out the original engraving in colour. The result is a striking representation of a goat with outstretched neck, and fore-leg uplifted, as if in the act of climbing.

It is, of course, one thing to see a photograph of an outlined picture, and quite another thing to handle the weathered pebble and to follow the delicate work

of the prehistoric engraver. As I was anxious to examine the untouched original, at the invitation of Mr. Gray and Mr. Abbott, I paid a visit to St. Leonards on February 19th of this year, to see the historic stone.

To those who have not had the same opportunity an account of the impression made by a first inspection may possibly be of interest.

It must be confessed that a mere cursory look at the stone, from which the coloured tracing had been washed, produced a feeling of disappointment. Before me was a liver-brown pebble, roughly pear-shaped, and measuring about $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches long by $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches at its greatest width. In a shallow depression on one side a few incised lines were certainly visible, but their relation to one another was not so evident. A second and more careful glance, however, revealed a groove deeper than the rest, which took a very decided boat-shaped curve, and at once caught the attention. This turned out to be the back and part of the neck of the animal. Hardly less distinct was the corresponding line of the chest, and the two fore-legs, but besides this little more could at first be distinguished.

Anyone who has had experience in deciphering time-worn inscriptions, will know that this cannot be done hastily, and coin collectors are aware that the legend which to an expert is perfectly legible, may be absolutely invisible to an inexperienced observer. Just as the coin must be turned this way and that, in varying degrees of light and shade, before the almost obliterated letters can be distinguished, so the Nayland goat-stone must be patiently humoured till this ancient engraving suddenly presents itself in its entirety. Needless to say, the white line which the graving tool would have left in the first instance,



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has long since disappeared, and nothing remains but the incision to indicate the form of the animal.

As long as the stone was held in the full light little could be seen beyond the tracings already mentioned, but on turning it so that it was slightly in shadow, head, ears, and the boldly cut eye seemed to leap into view, till the whole body of the creature, with the exception of the hind quarters, was distinctly visible.

It took a few minutes before the rest of the figure became evident, but when once the trick of placing the stone in the right position was mastered, any doubt as to the intentional work of the artist was removed.

As a further test, I asked for pencil and paper, in order to make a drawing of what I saw. Though roughly done, and with the added difficulty of holding the stone in the precise position required to catch the shadows from these minute grooves, the drawing when finished was practically identical with the photographed tracing which our illustration shows.

To make the experiment doubly conclusive, a friend who was present also made an independent sketch from the stone itself, and again a picture which was almost a facsimile of those already made was the result.

To whatever subsequent criticism the Nayland goat may be subjected, these simple tests have at least convinced the writer that a genuine Figure-Stone, such as a Palæolithic artist would have produced, has been found and handled in East Anglia.

Until quite recently it has been a moot point as to whether men of the late Aurignac and Solutré

periods ever visited this country, but discoveries of worked flints corresponding to those of the French cave deposits go far to establish the fact.

Dr. Sturge was one of the first to draw attention to the similarity between many so-called Neolithic implements and these older types, and since the ball has been set rolling, many another collector has re-classified his specimens on these lines.

It only remained to find the artistic productions belonging to this early epoch, to give the final proof that men of this culture were not the monopoly of our Continental friends. This we believe to be supplied by the Nayland figure-stone.