

The Aboriginal Rock Carvings at Mt. Cameron West, Tasmania, Photographs and Notes on the Excavations

By

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WITH 8 PLATES AND 1 TEXT FIGURE

SUMMARY

This paper records the excavation of further aboriginal rock carvings at Mt. Cameron West, Tasmania and gives photographs of the most interesting groups.

INTRODUCTION

So far as is known at present, there are only three localities where rock carvings attributable to Tasmanian aborigines have been recorded. These are at Devonport (Meston and Scott, 1932), at Mt. Cameron West (Meston, 1933, 1934) and Trial Harbour (Jones, 1938).

The Devonport carvings are on dolerite, those at Trial Harbour on granite and those at Mt. Cameron West on calcareous sandstone. This last area contains the most numerous and certainly the most impressive examples of this type of native art yet discovered in the State. This article gives a key to their location and the photographs constitute a record of this important material, much of which may be lost by erosion. Meston (1932) and Crowther (1949) both referred to the rapid rate with which the carvings were deteriorating and in January 1949 it was obvious that the one illustrated in Plate IV of Meston's paper (1933) was in an advanced state of erosion. By February 1950 the carvings had broken in three pieces, one of which had disappeared. With the permission of the V.D.L. Company the remaining pieces have been removed to the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston. Before the carving was moved a plane table survey of its position was made by Mr. W. D. Jackson.

The carvings are located about one chain above the High Water Mark approximately two miles north of Mt. Cameron West, Latitude $40^{\circ} 50' S$, $144^{\circ} 42.5' E$ and are in two defined areas, a small one containing three carvings and a larger one of at least 50 carvings about seven chains further north (Text fig.).

Of the carvings in the smaller area, one, that removed to Launceston, has three parallel rows of indentations, a feature not found in any other carvings in either area. Of the two other carvings one is of a human face, having a circle for outline, two large indentations representing eyes, a verticle line for the nose and a horizontal line for the mouth. Across the top of the circle is the outline of a hat which bears a resemblance to the type worn by sailors of the late 18th century. It is possible that the original carving consisted of a circle and two indentations only as the outline of the hat is slightly shallower while the nose and mouth lines, being shallower still and showing little signs of erosion, could have been added at a much more recent date. A somewhat similar design of two indentations in a circle may be seen on the removed carving.

In the larger area before excavation commenced the only carvings visible were those on 12 blocks of talus and those on the overhanging cliff above. Subsequent removal of shrubs, creepers and a considerable depth of sand uncovered 14 more blocks.

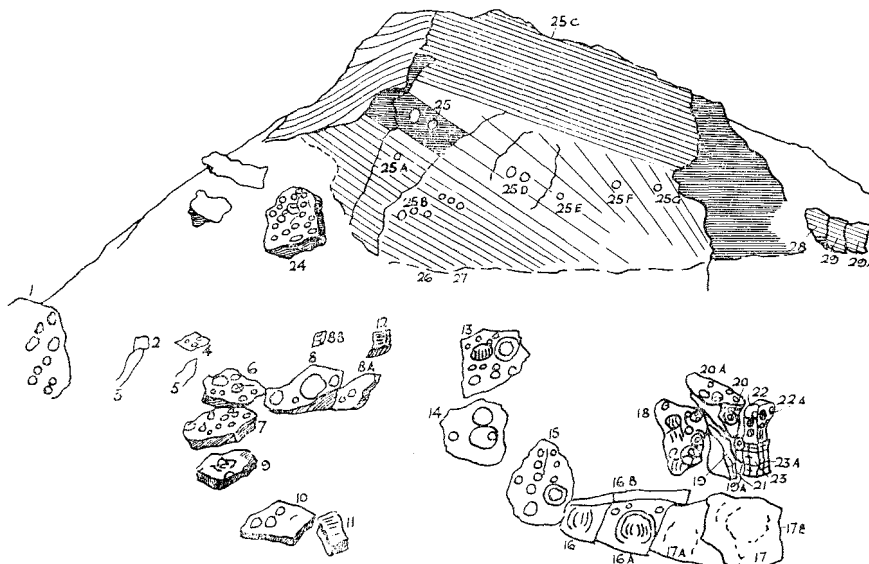
It seems probable that the cliff face had been undermined by the sea and large blocks had fallen and piled at the foot of the cliff. These blocks were carved where they fell, all available surfaces being used. Many of these were later covered by sand blown in from the seaward side.

Thirty-six of the carvings are on the natural bed surface and the others on end grain. They vary considerably in shape and size from one square foot to 35 square feet but each design, whether simple or complex, has been executed with a good sense of proportion and balance. The stone was easy to carve owing to its low crushing strength; in its present state it is possible in many cases to rub a groove with finger pressure only, particularly where the surface has been covered for some time with sand. Methods used by the aborigines in carving could have been hammering, gouging, rubbing or a combination of these. On certain of the carvings final rubbing is the only way in which they could have obtained the good sharp edge which still holds even to-day.

During excavations four small, flat stones oval in shape and averaging two inches long by one and a quarter inches wide were found, one at the base of the carving No. 18 and three under 19a. It is possible that these stones were used for rubbing the designs above since they fitted the grooves, although they showed no apparent signs of wear.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CARVINGS

For purposes of reference each rock bearing a design has been numbered, the various rocks being subdivided and referred to as A, B, . . . G. The numbering of the carvings and their position in relation to the overhanging cliff are illustrated in the text figure.



TEXT FIG.--Key showing position of carvings in relation to the cliff.

Where the covering sand was damp, particularly on horizontal surface, the carved rock had merged with the sand itself, while those which had become covered with vegetation, flaked off through the penetration into the sandstone of countless fine rootlets. Hence, excavation had to be done very carefully, the bulk of the sand being hoed away to within some inches of the rock surface, the rest removed by hand and when dry the carvings lightly brushed.

Prior to the excavation No. 3 was partly covered with sand and vegetation, Nos. 10 and 11 completely covered, No. 13 nearly completely covered, Nos. 14, 15 and 16 completely covered, No. 16a partly covered, 16b completely covered, Nos. 18-23 almost or completely buried.

A bank of drifted sand hid No. 19 and part of 22 and completely filled the gap between them to within a few inches of the bottom of the top block No. 20. After 14 inches of sand between 19 and 21 had been removed a three-inch layer of small mussel shells was found together with a quantity of charcoal in the innermost corner against 21; beneath this was a two-inch layer of sand then another layer of midden material including mussel, turbo and haliotis shells and charcoal for four inches; then sand again for 14 inches followed by another layer of mussel, turbo, haliotis shells and charcoal for nine inches. About halfway through this layer was found a waterworn rock; bearing traces of red ochre on one side which may have been a grinding stone of pestle; also in this layer were the three small stones mentioned earlier.

About another three inches of sand brought the excavation to the bases of 19 and 23. For at least three different periods, therefore, the shelter formed by 19, 20 and 21 was used for a cooking fire and the carvings were in existence when the aborigines were still living in the district.

After excavation the carvings were photographed untouched and then outlined with chalk or charcoal and photographed again.

For reasons of economy all the photographs cannot be reproduced here but the more interesting carvings are represented in Plates I-VIII. A fuller range of photographs has been deposited in the Society's Archives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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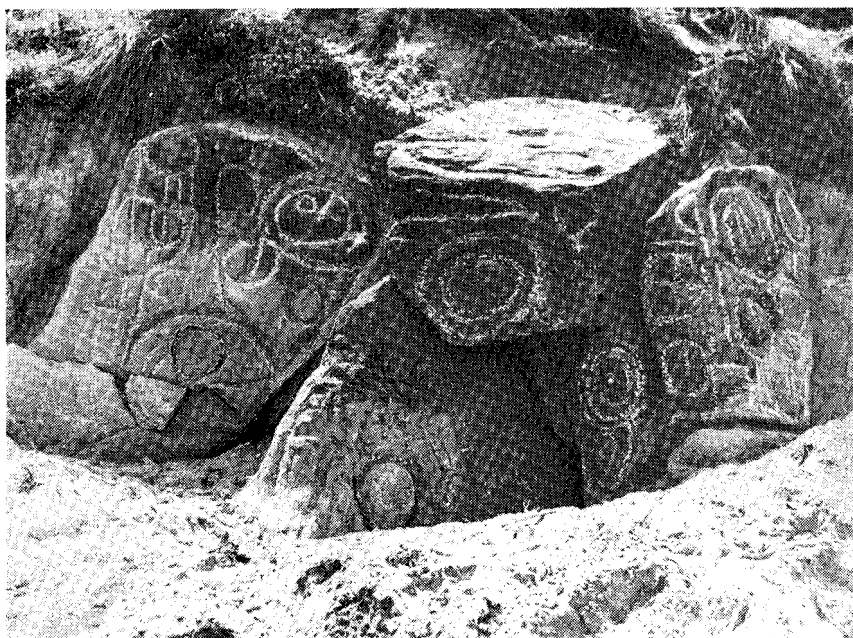


FIG. 1.—Carvings 18-23 partially excavated $\times \frac{1}{40}$



FIG. 2.—Detail of 18 (left) and No. 20 top right $\times \frac{1}{32}$

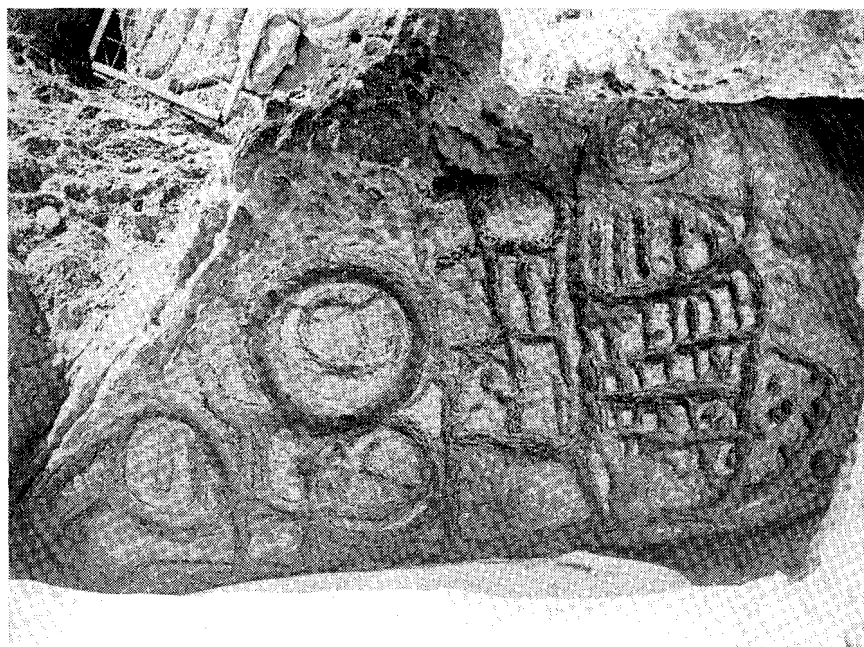


FIG. 3.—Carving No. 19 outlined with charcoal to show detail $\times \frac{1}{20}$

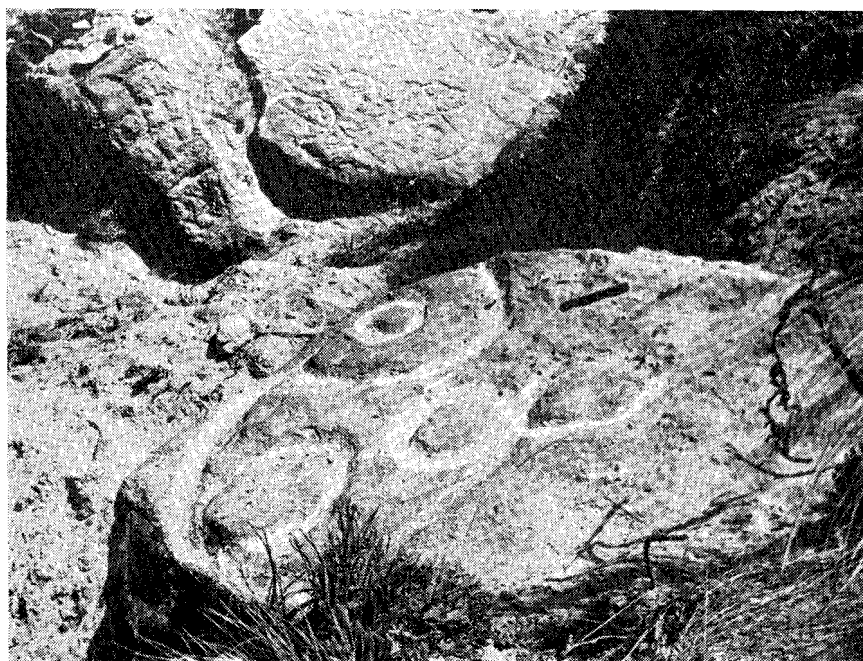


FIG. 4.—General view showing 20A (foreground and 16B and 17B (background) $\times \frac{1}{18}$

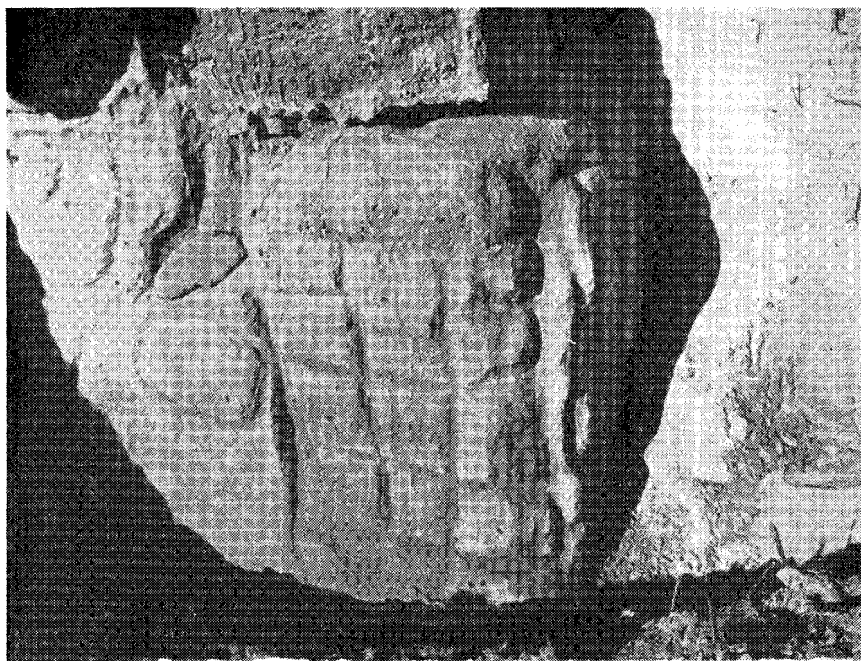


FIG. 5.—Detail of No. 23.

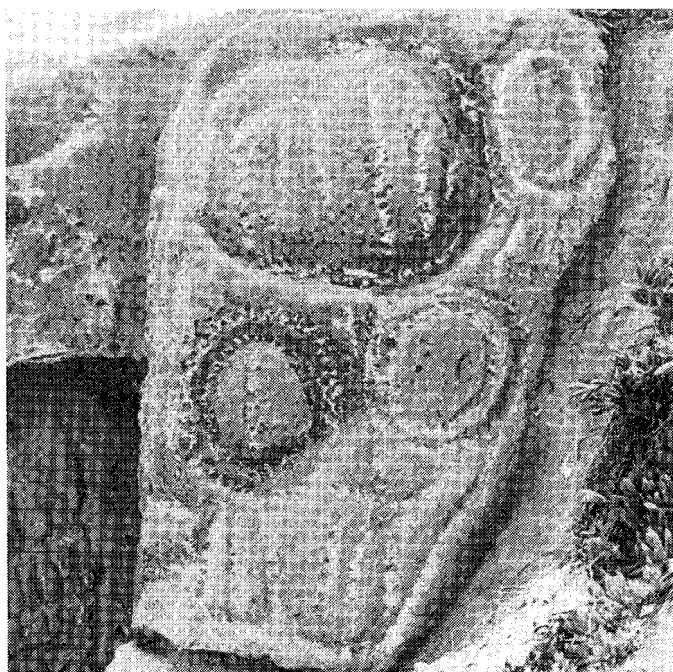


FIG. 6.—Detail of No. 22A $\times \frac{1}{12}$



FIG. 7.—Detail of No. 21 $\times \frac{1}{8}$

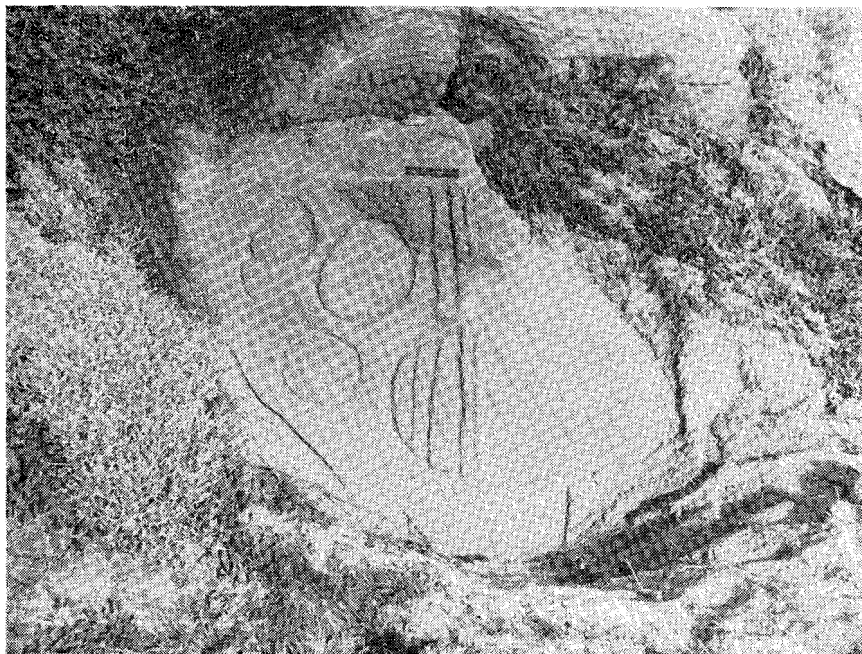


FIG. 8.—Detail of No. 3. Note severe erosion on the right hand side where a layer of rock has faced off. No. 2 is just visible as a circle under the overhanging rock above $\times \frac{1}{25}$

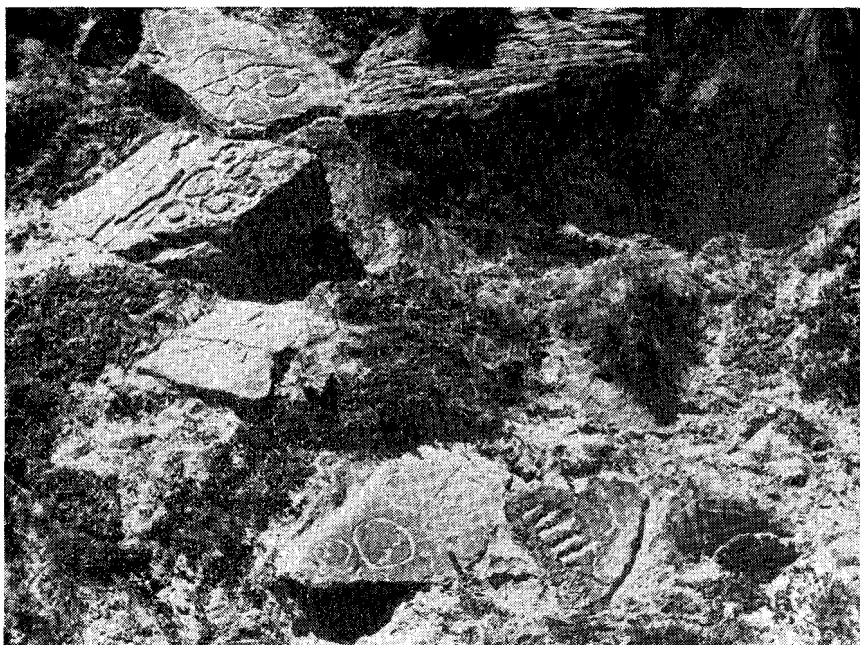


FIG. 9.—General view of No. 6-11 $\times \frac{1}{43}$

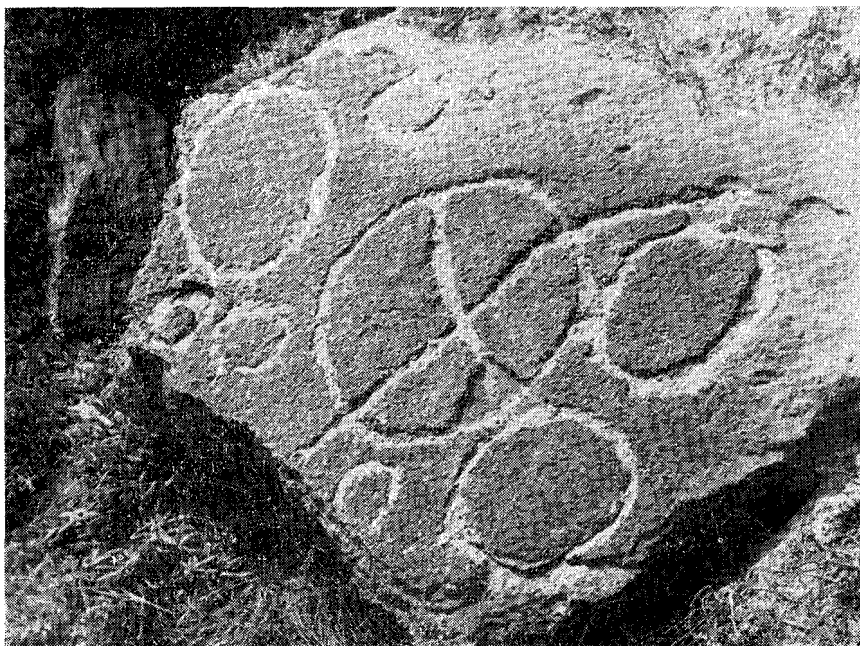


FIG. 10.—Detail of No. 6 $\times \frac{1}{10}$



FIG. 11.—Detail of No. 7 $\times \frac{1}{20}$

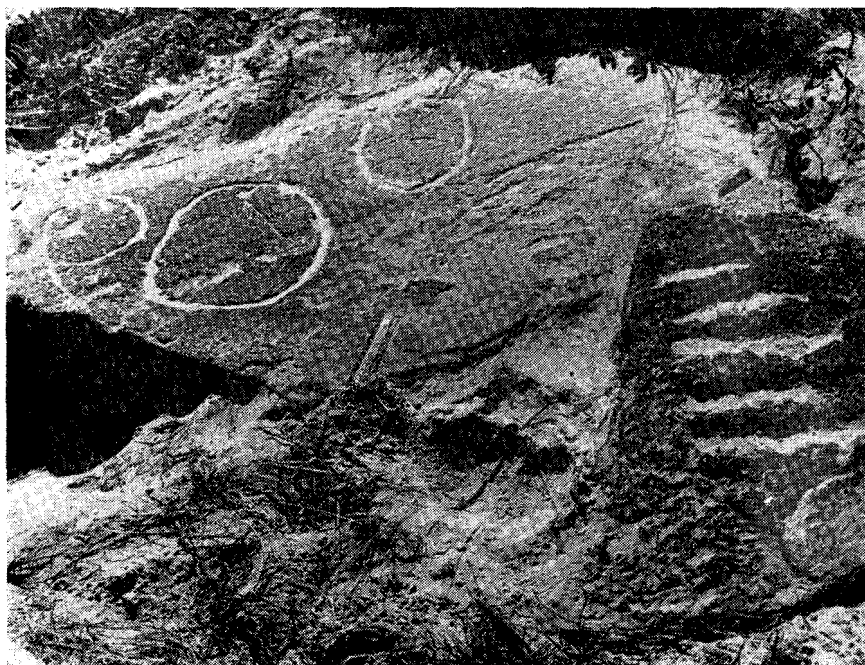


FIG. 12.—Nos. 10 and 11 $\times \frac{1}{10}$

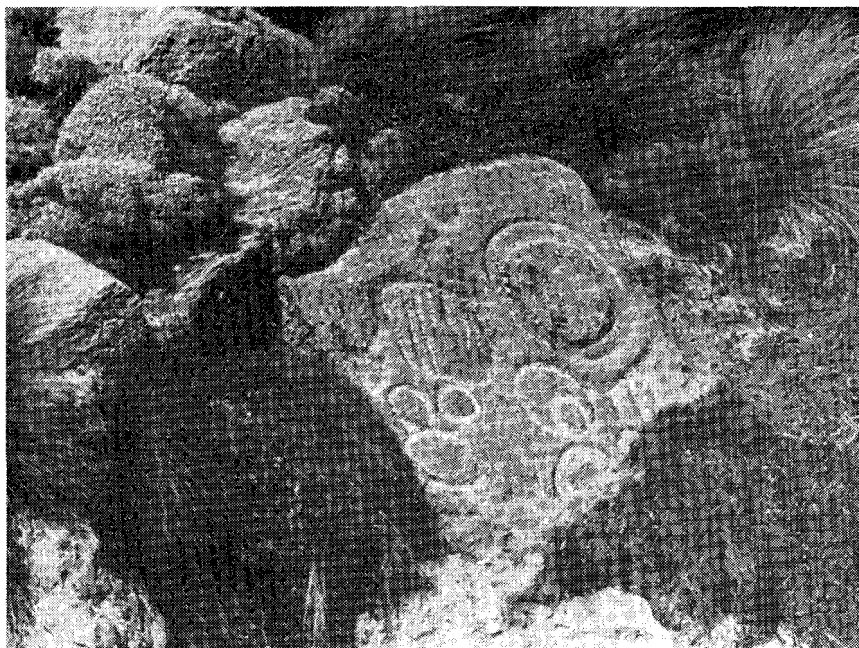


FIG. 13.—No. 13 general view $\times \frac{1}{40}$



FIG. 14.—No. 14 $\times \frac{1}{25}$



FIG. 15.—Detail of 16B $\times \frac{1}{24}$

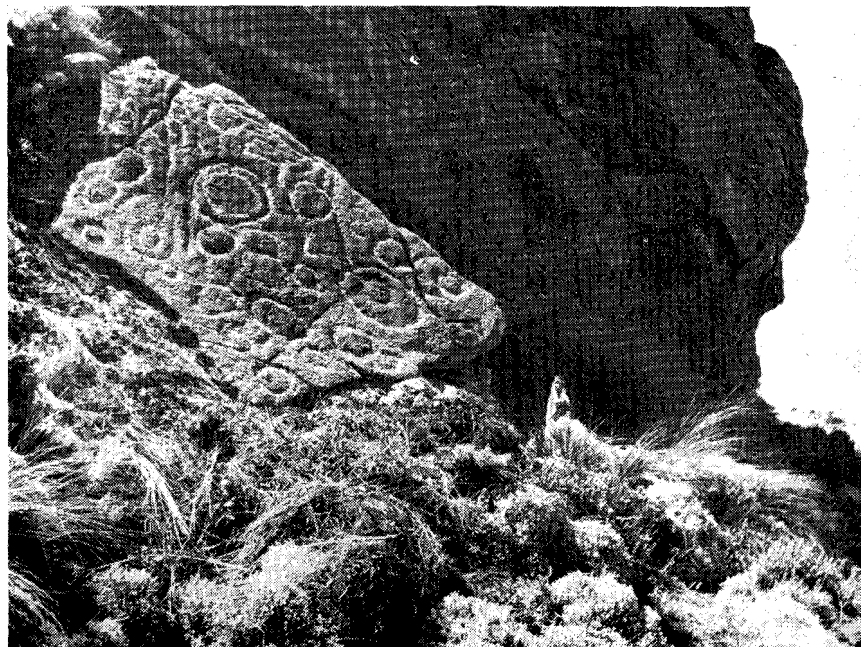


FIG. 16.—General view showing No. 24. Under the ledges of the overhanging cliff in the background are 25 and 25A, the former being above the reach of the average man.