



CARVED STONES



The Picts carved unique symbols that were not just decorative but conveyed a message, although the meaning is now lost to us. © Crown copyright: Historic Scotland

Scotland possesses a remarkable range of carved stones, from the cupmarked slabs of early prehistoric times to the gravestones and sundials of recent centuries. They are an important resource for reconstructing the past, because they are clues that can lead to the discovery or interpretation of graves, buildings and sacred places. They are also, unfortunately, highly vulnerable to damage from natural weathering and human intervention. Carved stones are often turned up by the plough or revealed by coastal erosion, and even small fragments can help to illuminate the past.

Prehistoric religious beliefs were sometimes expressed through carving on natural rock faces, on standing stones and on burial monuments. Cupmarks are circular hollows, and cup-and-ring marks have one or more rings carved round the hollow. In Argyll and southwest Scotland, large expanses of rock face have been carved in this way to create sacred places in the landscape.

Occasionally spirals and chevrons were carved on stones in burial tombs, and signs can be found on the walls of

houses, in both cases dating to four to five thousand years ago. Copper and bronze axes were highly valued items from around 2200 BC, and depictions of axes have been found carved in stone in burial monuments.

With the Roman occupation of Scotland in the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD came the practice of dressing or shaping stone for building and the idea of carved and even inscribed gravestones, and these may indicate the former existence of a Roman fort in the vicinity. During the building of the Antonine Wall, the turf wall that the Roman army constructed as a barrier across central Scotland, distance-slabs were incorporated to record the length built by individual units of the army. Both types of inscription were in Latin, and the decoration was sometimes sculpted in relief, making the figures stand out higher than their background.

An early chapel would have a stone altar, which might have a carved panel, and some had stone shrines to hold saints' relics. These shrines consisted of panels slotted into cornerposts and they were often very ornately carved.





There are two different types of carvings on this stone: the rectangle and part of a fish above it are Pictish symbols, while the short strokes on the sloping line are ogham letters. © Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland.

Christianity was introduced to southern Scotland in late Roman times, blossoming from the 6th century AD onwards. By about AD 700 it was the dominant religion throughout Scotland. There is a vast range of carved stones connected with Christianity, from gravestones and crosses to building stones and internal fittings from churches. The earliest chapels were built of timber, but from the 8th century AD they were often built in stone. Gravestones were carved with the symbol of the cross and sometimes with Latin inscriptions.

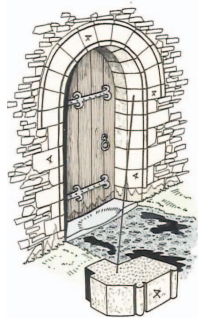
Unique to Scotland are the symbol stones set up by the Picts from the 6th to the 9th centuries AD. A uniform set of symbols was used throughout Pictland from the Firth of Forth to Shetland to convey messages that cannot now be understood. They were carved in pairs or in multiples of pairs on natural slabs and boulders. Once Christianity had been adopted, symbols were also carved on cross-

slabs, either beside the cross or on the back of the slab. Fragments of such stones may indicate the presence nearby of graves, churches or settlements. Pictish symbols, the Christian cross and inscriptions can also be found on the walls of caves.

Roman script was not the only alphabet in use in early medieval times. From Ireland came another script, ogham, in which letters were represented by groups of strokes on either side of a central line.



A simple cross-slab was a common memorial to mark a grave from early Christian times onwards. This fragment of an early Christian cross-slab is now in St Vigean's Museum, Angus. © Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland.



Architectural fragments are a source of information about the buildings from which they came. Here the fragment can be interpreted as part of the moulding round a doorway, probably from a church.

Ogham was also used on memorial stones, as well as on stones in buildings, from the 6th to the 10th centuries AD. The runic alphabet was introduced by Norse or Viking settlers in the 10th to the 12th centuries AD. The letters were formed by vertical and sloping strokes, and were used on gravestones and crosses to record the dead, and on buildings and caves to record less formal messages.

Gravestones can be simple slabs incised with the cross or dressed in the shape of a cross, and they can be elaborately decorated, according to the preference or wealth of those erecting them. Some were set upright and others lay recumbent over the grave. In later medieval times, effigies of warriors in full armour became popular among leading families, while in post-medieval times burial aisles and raised table-tombs were



This 19th-century gravestone at Glenorchy Parish Church is covered with moss and lichen.

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favoured by those who could afford them.

Fragments of architectural carving may come from secular buildings such as castles and tower-houses as well as from churches and abbeys. There were often armorial panels carved with the family coat of arms and motto set above the main doorways of tower-houses, and fireplaces in the most important rooms had decorative stone surrounds. Stone garden furniture included sundials, benches and statues. Roadside stonework ranges widely from milestones to boundary markers, market crosses and war memorials.











Carved stones of all types help to illuminate past society and need to be recorded and preserved. Please report new discoveries to your local authority archaeologist or local museum, or to the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. Please avoid the temptation to clean them or to remove any growths unless expert advice has been sought.



A hogbacked tombstone from the 12th century lies within the graveyard at St Boniface, Orkney. The recumbent gravestone has a heavy growth of lichen and is half hidden in the grass, but it is best left as it is.

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TIME-LINE

End of the last Ice Age Wildlife colonises land Mesolithic hunting settlers		12,500	
		8500	Flint scatters Shell mounds, rock shelters
Neolithic farming settlers		4000	Chambered tombs and houses Cupmarked rocks
		3000	Stone circles, henges, and standing stones
Metal technology (gold, copper)		2000	Burial mounds and short cists Hut-circles
Climate deteriorating Fortifications begin		1000	Burnt mounds Hillforts
Iron-working technology		500	Crannogs
		200	Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
		BC ▲	
		▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland		79	
Waning of Roman influence		200	Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
		400	
Introduction of Christianity Picts, Gaels, Britons and Anglians Start of the Viking Age		600	Long cist graves
		800	Early Christian and Pictish carved stones, chapels
Emergence of Scottish nation		1000	Pagan Viking graves and settlements
		1100	
First burghs		1200	Stone-built churches
		1500	Mottes, abbeys, stone-built castles
Reformation of the Church		1600	Tower-houses
Agricultural improvements & Industrial Revolution		1800	Deserted villages and farms
		1900	Coal mines and heavy industries
Two World Wars		2000	Gun batteries and airfields

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

Cupmarks and cup-and-ring marks are found on rock outcrops as here, and on standing stones and boulders.

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<http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk>

The following leaflets are available from Historic Scotland:

Scheduled ancient monuments: a guide for owners, occupiers and land managers

Managing Scotland's archaeological heritage

Grants for Ancient Monuments: a guide to grants available for the preservation, maintenance and management of ancient monuments

Archaeology on farm and croft (produced jointly with Archaeology Scotland)

Scotland's listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers

The carved stones of Scotland: a guide to helping in their protection

Metal detecting - yes or no? Metal detecting, scheduled ancient monuments and the law

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes* on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stoneclarning are available, together with a Conservation of Historic Graveyards Guide for Practitioners; catalogue from and orders to:

Historic Scotland Conservation Group
Tel: 0131 668 8638

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