



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# CAIRNBAAN CUP AND RING MARKS



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## CAIRNBAAN CUP AND RING MARK ROCKS

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# I. SUMMARY

## 1.1 Introduction

Mid Argyll's rock art stands as one of Europe's finest groups of prehistoric monuments. The concentration is unparalleled in Britain. Cairnbaan is one of the most important sites in the area.

Cup and ring marked rocks are also known as rock carvings and rock art, the latter being the term currently used by rock art researchers.

The Cairnbaan rock art site consists of two groups of well preserved, decorated rock outcrops containing a wide variety of deeply carved, complex motifs, some of which are unusual.

Rock art can be defined as the creation of abstract motifs and designs which are pecked into earthfast bedrock, and less frequently, boulders, mostly on gently sloping faces. Rock art (possibly re-used) also appears on elements or components of monuments. It is part of a tradition distributed across Northern and Western Britain down the Atlantic seaboard into France, Spain and Portugal.

Research including excavation over the last 20 years on rock art as a monument type has examined the importance of landscape setting and relationships to other monuments. Although the abstract nature of the motifs challenges any interpretation of their meaning, this work has helped to open a more nuanced debate around chronology, methods of recording, as well as an understanding of the way in which these sites might have held meaning in the past.

Recent work on dating rock art sites points to them being late Neolithic, between 30th and 25th century BC (Sheridan 2012: 171), although it should be noted that only relatively few carbon dates are available.

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

- The Cairnbaan rock art site is one of the most complex in the region.
- The site has an innate aesthetic appeal best viewed as a visual whole.
- The Cairnbaan rock art site, situated as it is in one of Europe's most important prehistoric landscapes, has great landscape value in its own right, but also when viewed in the context of all the other monuments. Research over the last 20 years has brought forth an understanding of rock art as being part of the way in which prehistoric people perceived and actively created both their physical and spiritual/cosmological world.

- The Cairnbaan site has a wide variety of deeply carved, complex motifs, some of which are unusual.
- The site contains a ringed star motif which may be linked to Irish Passage-grave Art, dated to the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC (RCHAMS 1999: 8), thus this site may be important in establishing the nature of links between Mid Argyll and Ireland in prehistory.
- A large percentage of tourists to the area cite the archaeological monuments and Kilmartin Museum as a reason for visiting. Cultural tourism is one of the region's largest economic drivers.
- Most researchers' interpretations of the ways in which rock art is significant involve a level of spiritual value being placed upon these sites. Rock art sites are part of a suite of expressions of cosmological concerns evident throughout the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

### 2.1 Background

#### Overview of prehistoric Kilmartin Glen

Kilmartin Glen has a wealth of upstanding Prehistoric monuments (RCAHMS 1988), including burial cairns, a linear cairn cemetery, stone circles, standing stones, stone rows, and numerous rock art sites. It is one of Scotland's most important archaeological landscapes. These prominent monuments have attracted antiquarian and archaeological interest since the early 1900s and a wealth of important artefacts have been found as a result of that work.

Survey and recording of much of the Mid Argyll landscape was undertaken by local antiquarian Marion Campbell of Kilberry and her companion Mary Sandeman in the 1960s. In more recent decades, the work of Kilmartin Museum, developer funded and academic archaeologists have discovered many other monuments, subsoil features and artefacts. In addition, members of the public have also found artefacts by chance. All this knowledge has significantly contributed to the understanding of Kilmartin Glen and the surrounding areas, firmly establishing the Glen as one of Britain's most significant archaeological landscapes.

The dramatic topography of the Glen and surrounding landscape lent itself to the creation of a ritual and ceremonial landscape in Prehistory. Most of the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Early and Middle Bronze Age monuments are of a ceremonial or funerary nature. The earliest evidence of settlement in the Glen dates to the later Bronze Age, leading some to speculate that the area was used solely for ritual purposes. No systematic survey or

excavation programme has been undertaken across the whole Glen landscape, however. Therefore, the archaeological record is likely to be biased towards large and upstanding monuments than more ephemeral subsoil features and it is entirely possible that people were living in the Glen in earlier prehistoric periods as well as utilising it as a ritual landscape, but we simply haven't yet found the evidence for this.

### **Archaeological overview of rock art**

Rock art can be defined as the creation of abstract motifs and designs which are pecked into both earthfast bedrock, and less frequently, boulders and on elements or components of monuments using a harder stone than the rock face being carved.

It is part of a tradition of art which is distributed across Scotland, (from Orkney to Dumfries and Galloway), Northern England (Northumbria, Durham, Cumbria, the Peak District,) Wales, Ireland and down the Atlantic seaboard into France, Spain and Portugal (Bradley 1997, Sheridan 2012). In addition, Scandinavia has a strong rock art tradition, albeit with a very different motif palate.

Kilmartin Glen and the surrounding area has the highest concentration of rock art of anywhere in the British Isles as well as some of the most impressive sites (Bradley 1997, Beckensall, 2005, Jones et al 2011, Webb, 2012). There are over 100 known earthfast sites in the Kilmartin and Kilmichael Glassary parishes ranging from a single cup marked rock to highly decorated panels. Major sites in the areas include **Achnabreck**, **Cairnbaan**, **Kilmichael Glassary**, **Baluachraig**, **Ballygowan**, (all of which are Properties in Care), **Ardifuir**, **Glasvar**, **Leckuary**, **Ormaig** and **Poltalloch**.

A large number of the monuments in the area are also decorated with rock art including some of the standing stones at Ballymeanoch, at **Lady Glassary**, at Torbhlaren. The **Temple Wood** stone circle and also structural elements of **Ri Cruin** and **Nether Largie North** cairn (burial cairns in the linear cemetery) also have decorated elements. As Stevenson has noted, this tradition of decorating monuments makes the region a key area for the study of rock art (Stevenson 1997).

### **Summary of the history of rock art research**

Although early antiquarians and travellers to the West Highlands were interested in some of the area's prehistoric monuments, rock art received little attention. There is no mention of it in the Statistical Accounts of 1793 or 1845, although other monuments receive comment (Statistical Account 1793 and 1845, NLS online). The first description of Argyll's rock art appears in Archibald Currie's 1830 account of the antiquities of the area, which mentions the Cairnbaan rock art site (Currie 1830). 35 years later, Sir James Young Simpson's paper speculated on the meaning of this phenomena across Scotland, illustrating for the first time in a published account, cup and ring marked standing stones in Kilmartin Glen and the Achnabreck

rock art site (Simpson, 1864). Morris reports that the Kilmichael Glassary Rock Art site was first noted by Miss C S Campbell in 1900 (Morris, 1977:100). Christison's account of standing stones and cup marked rocks in Argyll published in 1903 records a variety of Argyll monuments and contains detailed illustrations of a number of sites including the Kilmichael Glassary Rock Art (Christison 1903).

The discovery and recording of rock art sites in Britain remained until relatively recently, largely the preserve of non-professional archaeologists. Of note in Mid Argyll are Marion Campbell and Mary Sandeman, (Campbell and Sandeman 1962) who recorded many sites and monuments including rock art sites. Other extremely important contributions by non-professional archaeologists have been made by Ronald Morris (Morris 1977) and Stan Beckensall (Beckensall 2005).

Professional archaeological contributions have been made by RCAHMS (RCAHMS 1988), who have discovered and recorded sites, using sophisticated drawing techniques to produce some of the most detailed records in the area. RCAHMS also note there are significant challenges in recording rock art (Stevenson 1997:97).

In addition to this, Kilmartin Museum have undertaken systematic field survey over discrete areas of ground, mostly upland farms surrounding the main centre of Kilmartin Glen and neighbouring Kilmichael Glen, work which has revealed 34 never before recorded sites.

There are just over 200 known rock art sites on earthfast rocks and boulders in Mid Argyll, as recorded on Canmore (February 2018).

### **Interpretation of rock art**

The meaning, context and understanding of the phenomena of British Rock art received little consideration in academic circles until the 1990's. Richard Bradley's seminal work on the landscape setting of rock art sites and how these carvings related to other monuments has sparked a more nuanced debate and allowed the question of meaning to be approached (Bradley 1997).

The abstract nature of the motifs make them very difficult to 'read' and it has been suggested that this challenge is one reason why the question of meaning was ignored for so long (Mazel, Nash and Waddington 1997). Since Bradley's work, an interest in rock art has grown amongst academics, heritage managers, non-professional and professional archaeologists and the general public.

Research has helped to open debate around chronology, methods of recording, as well as an understanding of the way in which these sites might have held meaning in the past. The wide geographic spread of similar motifs has been noted by many researchers as extraordinary and an indication of wide-ranging connections, and the possibility of long distance

travel (Bradley, 1997, Mazel, Nash and Waddington, 1997, Jones, 2011, Sheridan, 2017). In Mid Argyll, excavations at Ormaig (Ellis and Webb 2007), and Torbhlaren Rock Art sites (Jones et. al, 2011) have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of context and landscape setting. Importantly, "...while we may never understand *what* these motifs mean, we are potentially able to understand *how* they have meaning, to understand what makes rock art significant" (Jones 2011 (b):7), an acceptance of limitation that has nonetheless not constrained the need for comprehension.

### **Dating of rock art**

Although based on small sample sizes, archaeologists are beginning to gain an understanding of the dating of rock art as being related to the Neolithic period (Mazel, Nash and Waddington 1997). Sheridan points to rock art being Late Neolithic, 3000 - 2500 BC (Sheridan 2012: 171) and this concurs with the 3 carbon dates from the Torbhlaren rock art site in Kilmichael Glen, which ranged between 2920 - 2860 cal BC and 1320-1110 cal BC (Jones and Riggott 2011: 253). It should be noted that further work to confirm these dates is a high research priority.

### **Cairnbaan cup and ring mark rocks**

The site came into Guardianship in 1932 as one of several prehistoric monuments on the Poltalloch Estate taken into Guardianship.

The site consists of two groups of well preserved, decorated rock outcrops which lie in pasture and heather moorland in the hills to the North of the Cairnbaan Hotel.

The following description has been taken from the RCAHMS (1988) description:

*Group 1: consists of three sheets of cup and ring marked bedrock.*

*Group 1, sheet 1: the largest of the three sheets – the decoration comprises of a pair of cups surrounded by three partial rings, one cup with two rings, three cups with a single ring, 16 single cups with single rings, at least 60 plain cups, several lengths of grooving and long gutters run downslope from seven of the cups at the south end of the outcrop.*

*Group 1, sheet 2: on an outcrop which lies in the centre of the enclosure there are six plain cup marks.*

*Group 1, sheet 3: on an outcrop at the NW of the enclosure there are three cup marks with double rings and six plain cups.*

*Group 2: 100m to the west of Group 1 is a flat sheet of bedrock flush with the ground surface which bears a complex set of rock art motifs. There are a number of conjoined multiple ringed cups. Six of these are surrounded by four rings, one by three rings, seven by two rings*

*and eight by single rings. Several of the ringed cups have gutters. There are also at least 15 plain cups and lengths of grooves. To the NE of the sheet is a weathered motif consisting of a broad shallow cup surrounded by a single ring linked to a cup by a series of rays.* (RCAHMS 1988).

Group 1 lies in Rough pasture, Group 2 lies at the beginning of heather moorland.

Jones and Tipping analysed the art motifs at the Cairnbaan rock art site in relation to microtopography and recorded a total of 66 motifs (see Jones and Tipping, 2011:23-24 for a full description). It was noted that the Cairnbaan site demonstrates the clearest distinction in terms of positioning of motifs in relation to natural cracks and fissures in the bed rock (see Jones and Tipping, 2011:24).

Morris gives a detailed account and includes illustrations (Morris, 1977:63-66) for panels he describes as Cairnbaan 1, 2 and 3. There is a discrepancy in the numbers of motifs between the three descriptions, which may be due to vegetation encroachment, weathering, or differences in recording techniques.

The outcrop is fenced.

## 2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of the Cairnbaan rock art Site is high. The site itself is one of the most sophisticated sites in the area. The site has not been excavated and sits in pasture and moorland, thus there is potential for associated deposits which may help to understand how these sites were used and at what date.

In 2006 a piece of worked Arran pitchstone was found in a mole hill at the site by the late Blaze O'Connor (an archaeologist specialising in rock art). This pitch stone is now in the collections of Kilmartin Museum.

The potential for discovering further rock art in close proximity to the Cairnbaan rock art Site is high.

The study of Cairnbaan rock art site and others has the potential to develop a nuanced understanding of the Late Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age period on a regional and national wide level, thus making this site valuable in terms of research potential.

The site contains a ringed star motif which may be linked to Irish Passage-grave Art, dated to the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC (RCHAMS 1999: 8), thus this site may be important in establishing the nature of links between Mid Argyll and Ireland in prehistory.

## 2.3 Historical values

The Cairnbaan rock art site, along with the others in Mid Argyll are of exceptional importance because they may help us to understand why Kilmartin Glen developed as a ritual centre. Rock art very probably predates many of the other monuments in the Glen, and may in fact be the reason why later generations chose to signify the importance of the place with other monuments (Freedman, Jones and Riggott 2011: 244). The study of Cairnbaan rock art site and others has the potential to develop a more nuanced understanding of the Late Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age period on a regional and national wide level.

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire<sup>1</sup> has highlighted that Cairnbaan rock art site has ‘property’ empire connection<sup>2</sup> as it was owned by the Malcolms of Poltalloch. The Malcolms of Poltalloch acquired significant slavery-derived wealth during the colonial era in Jamaica. This included acting as merchants, holding shares in companies trading in the region, and owning enslaved people. Considerable monies came through compensation given when slavery was abolished in Britain. Neil Malcolm collected almost £40,000 compensation in 1835. The family used this wealth to become major landowners in Scotland, with the acquired estates containing many sites that would become Properties in Care. The estates were cleared to create aesthetically pleasing landscapes, with funds also being directed to the excavation of some of the archaeological sites.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Study of individual panels has established that each has its own character, and although the cup mark is a universal symbol, there is variation in other motifs, ranging from cup marks surrounded by rings, to tails, gutters and key holes, and there is some evidence that the natural characteristics of the bed rock itself was also used as part of the art work, merging natural and cultural features into a single aesthetic expression. Although there has been some focus on individual motifs, it has been suggested that rock art panels are best appreciated as a visual whole (Jones 2011 (b): 5).

It has been suggested that the natural cracks and fissures in the bedrock has been used as if it were a frame for the creation of motifs (Jones and Tipping 2011:29).

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<sup>1</sup> Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/research-and-archives/publications-and-archives/publications-and-archives/property-empire-connection)

<sup>2</sup> ‘Property’ connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recently enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

<sup>3</sup> Mullen *et al* 2024, 50-55.

Oblique light creates shadows which highlights the rock art, making it more dramatic and easier to see. Rainwater sitting in the cup marks creates a different experience.

The Cairnbaan site is particularly complex and has profusely decorated outcrops. The carvings themselves are deep and distinctive, making this one of the best sites for visitors to appreciate rock art.

## **2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values**

The Cairnbaan site, situated as it is in one of Europe's most important prehistoric landscapes, has great landscape value in its own right, but also when viewed in the context of all the other monuments.

Research over the last 20 years has brought forth an understanding of rock art as being part of how prehistoric people perceived and actively created both their physical and spiritual/cosmological world.

The spatial relationship to rock art and natural landscape features, such as easy route ways from Kilmartin Glen into ancillary Glens, ridges on the higher hills and possibly more fertile agricultural land was noted by Regan (2008) and an understanding of these inter-relationships has further been developed by Jones et. al (2012). The site sits on a hill that flanks the south-western entrance to Kilmartin Glen, a clearly significant and purposeful placing, and could be described as a nodal site.

Jones argues that rock art was a component of a settled landscape occupied by Neolithic agriculturalists and that its creation was an active part of 'socializing' the landscape into a system in which it becomes more organised and that this relates to cosmological concerns as well as economic interests (2011 (a) xviii). Rock art at least in part, may have circumscribed rights of movement and access to resources, and as such, defined peoples relationships with the landscape, making these sites significant in a process which is enhanced by use over time (Freedman, Jones and Riggott 2011:242-244).

## **2.6 Natural heritage values**

To be assessed.

## **2.7 Contemporary/use values**

### **Social values**

A significant number of artists use rock art sites as inspiration, and have produced work in a variety of media, including weaving and other textile art, painting, drawing, print making, sculpture and glass work.

The Cairnbaan rock art site has interpretation boards installed by Historic Environment Scotland which provide information on the site and other monuments in the area to visitors.

Kilmartin Museum was founded in 1997 and its mission is to inspire and educate people by interpreting, explaining and conserving the internationally important archaeological landscape, artefacts and natural heritage of Kilmartin Glen, including the area's rock art.

A cast of the Cairnbaan site is on display in the Museum. This was made in 1996 by AOC Archaeology.

A large percentage of tourists to the area cite the archaeological monuments and Kilmartin Museum as a reason for visiting. Cultural tourism is one of the region's largest economic drivers.

Kilmartin Museum and the education service are part funded by Historic Environment Scotland.

### Spiritual Values

Most academic interpretations of the ways in which rock art is significant involve a level of spiritual value being placed upon these sites (Bradley 1997, Jones et. al. 2011, Sheridan 2012). Rock art sites are part of a suite of expressions of cosmological concerns evident throughout the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age. Ethnographic work amongst people who still create rock art supports this understanding.

The act of experiencing is important, and it has also been noted that the act of creation is also significant – described by Jones as an “*act of veneration, closely weaving motifs with the substance and texture of the rock itself. It is simultaneously an act directed towards the future as it marks or defines a significant place in the landscape for future generations to encounter*”. (Freedman, Jones and Riggott 2011:244).

There is anecdotal evidence that these sites are special for people today and this is evidenced by ‘offerings’ of flowers and burn out candles occasionally found at some sites.

## 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

There are major gaps in our understanding relating to dating. The relationship to other sites and monuments that may have existed and been in active use at the same time as rock art also requires better understanding. Other gaps in our understanding of Cairnbaan and other sites are:

- Only three sites in Mid Argyll have been excavated to date, these being Ormaig, ‘Panel 3’ at **Achnabreck** and Torbhlaren. Ormaig, and ‘Panel 3’ at **Achnabreck** are located in forestry plantation, therefore

any deposits or structures around the sites that might have existed would almost certainly not have survived the tree planting process (Ellis and Webb 2007), (Regan, Webb and O'Connor 2008). More evidence via excavation to establish broader dates for these sites is required, to help consolidate the research already undertaken. Experimentation with forms of dating such as Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating might also yield results.

- We know that rock art is only one component of monument creation in the landscape, and that there may well have been pre-existing monuments and structures also in use at the same time, but our understanding of the relationships between different types of sites and monuments is not well understood (Sheridan, 2012:174).
- The recently published Research Framework for Argyll identified the following as a major gap in our understanding of rock art: *“How does cup-and-ring rock art fit into our overall understanding of the nature of society, beliefs, and external contacts in Argyll and Bute? Currently it tends to be studied in its own right, but it needs to be situated within Late Neolithic practices (and more dating evidence for its creation is needed).”* Sheridan (<https://scarf.scot/regional/rarfa/>)
- There are also challenges around management and the best way to ensure long term preservation of sites, this is especially important given that threats are set to increase. The challenges associated with managing these sites has been acknowledged, however, no standard approach to ensuring their future preservation has yet been determined. Previously unknown rock art sites are being discovered every year in Mid Argyll. Afforestation is a particular threat to buried sites because this activity does not fall under the planning legislation in the same way other large scale land use changes do. Sites are at risk and an example of this is one known site being unwittingly damaged in Kilmichael Glen in recent years.
- The discrepancies regarding numbers of motifs which is apparent in the descriptions published of the site in a 30 odd year interval (Morris, 1977, RCAHMS 1988, Jones and Tipping, 2011). Generally, the written descriptions of rock art sites by different researchers do not often match. These accounts are potentially useful to study possible deterioration in condition of the rock art by making comparisons over time, however, it is often impossible to determine if differences detected are in fact due to weathering, or a recording bias since they are based on arbitrary factors including, condition of the site, vegetation, and light and individual interpretation.
- The Cairnbaan rock art site is some miles away from the main monument groupings, however, its close proximity to the Crinan Canal and the Cairnbaan hotel mean that it is a desirable site for visitors, especially those travelling through the Crinan Canal by boat.

Direct signposting from the canal and more explicit signing near the hotel (where the foot path to the site begins) could be undertaken to increase visitor numbers.

## 4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- Achnabreck Cup and Ring Marked Rocks,
- Ballygowan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Baluachraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Cairnbaan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Carnassarie Castle
- Dunadd Fort
- Dunchraigaig Cairn
- Kilmartin Churchyard, Crosses, Tombstone and Neil Campbell Tomb
- Kilmartin Crosses
- Kilmichael Glassary Prehistoric Rock Carvings
- Kilmartin Glebe Cairn
- Kilmartin Sculptured Stones
- Nether Largie Mid Cairn
- Nether Largie North Cairn
- Nether Largie South Cairn
- Ri Cruin Cairn
- Temple Wood Stone Circles and Cairns

## 5. KEYWORDS

Cup-mark; cup-and-ring mark; Neolithic; Bronze Age

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