



# PREHISTORIC RELIGION



*A boulder decorated with rows of cupmarks may have marked a prehistoric boundary or a sacred place in the landscape.*

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Natural landmarks are likely to have had particular meaning, from large trees and rock outcrops to water springs and pools. In Argyll and south-west Scotland, smooth rock faces were carved with cupmarks and cup-and-ring marks, which served some ritual purpose. Precious objects were thrown into lochs or buried in the ground, apparently to appease the gods. Burial mounds and standing stones were carefully sited on skylines. Some places were so sacred that they became the focus for a number of ritual monuments and acted as ceremonial centres.

*The parallel sides and rounded end of the cursus show up from the air as dark lines in the growing crop. The modern roads and houses cut across this prehistoric sacred monument.*

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Without the benefit of written records, we can only speculate about the character of pre-Christian religion. The natural world is likely to have played a major role, and celebration of the seasons of the year would have been important to a rural farming society. Ritual would have pervaded every aspect of life and death and would not have been separate from domestic activities. There are often features in prehistoric houses that appear not to have any domestic function: burials beneath the floors, for example, or pits containing cattle teeth.

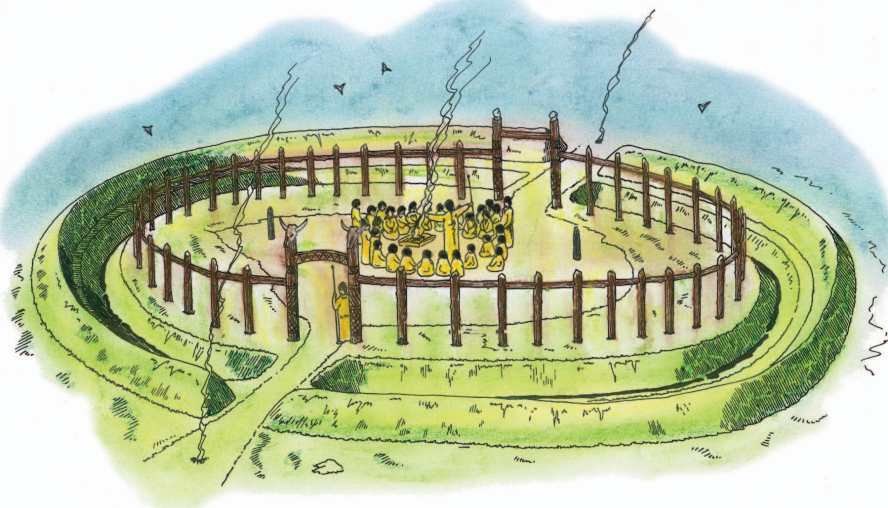




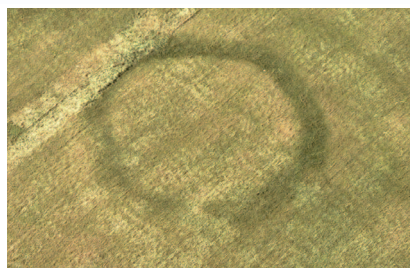
Earthwork monuments have often been flattened by ploughing and survive only as cropmarks seen from the air, but there is still likely to be important information below ground level. An early type of monument dating from about five thousand years ago is the cursus. This consists of two parallel banks and ditches that run for a considerable distance across country, with squared ends and rounded corners. We can only guess at how such monuments were used, perhaps as ceremonial pathways, but their construction involved much labour.

Standing stones are a familiar component of the Scottish landscape. Depending on the available local stone, they may be tall and elegant or short and stubby. They may be solitary stones, or set in pairs or even in rows (there are fan-shaped stone rows in Caithness). They may be arranged in squares (four-posters), circles or ovals, and sometimes stones of different colours are used to great effect.

*This artist's reconstruction evokes a ceremony in a henge monument. There is a ring of timber posts within the earthen bank and ditch. and some of the posts may have been decorated.*



An equally early monument is the henge, where the bank and ditch enclose a circular or oval area. There may have been timber circles inside, in which case the post-holes will usually survive below ground, and often there are circles of standing stones. These are likely to have been places where people met together and ceremonies were performed. Excavation has sometimes revealed animal bones in the ditches, which may suggest that feasting took place.



*Once a henge was abandoned, the ditch began to silt up. Ploughing eventually flattened the remains, and now the dark ring of the ditch can only be seen from the air. © RCAHMS (John Dewar Collection). Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)*

*Setting up a standing stone was a difficult task for a small community. In this reconstruction, the stone has been transported on timber rollers to the chosen place. A pit has been dug and lined with timber, and the stone has been dragged up a ramp until it overhangs the pit and its own weight will help to tip it into the hole.*













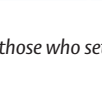
In north-east Scotland there is a special type of circle known as the recumbent stone circle, in which a large slab is set horizontal or recumbent between two flanking upright stones in the southwestern arc. Seen from within the circle, the recumbent arrangement frames the rising or setting of the moon at certain times, and sometimes cup-marks have been carved at the point where the moon rises or sets over the stones.

Interest in the movements of the moon may account for the widespread use of white quartz pebbles both in stone settings and in burial monuments. There was also interest in the movements of the sun at midsummer and midwinter solstices. There has been much controversy in recent decades over the possible use of stone settings for

more sophisticated astronomical observation, and most archaeologists view such theories with some misgivings. Very precise geometric design has been argued to explain the layout of oval stone settings, but again most archaeologists feel that the level of technology and the lack of literacy in prehistoric times makes such advanced knowledge unlikely. Nevertheless, their construction is likely to have been a major undertaking for the community.

These monuments were in use over very long periods of time, and their archaeology can be quite complex. In addition to the visible elements of all these ritual sites, there may be pits, graves and hearths below ground level. The likely survival of related archaeology has to be considered in the protection of these monuments.

# 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		500 200 BC ▲	Crannogs Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
		▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland		79	
Waning of Roman influence		200 400	Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
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:

Three great boulders set carefully in a row – what did they mean to those who set them up? Their original landscape would have been very different, perhaps a clearing in the forest.

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Historic Scotland is an agency within the Scottish Government and is responsible for administering the legislation that protects ancient monuments (buildings, ruins, archaeological sites and landscapes). It provides general advice on the conservation and protection of Scotland's heritage.

Historic Scotland has an Education Manager, who can offer information and advice to teachers wishing to use ancient monuments in their teaching.

Teachers' packs are available for the most popular themes and monuments maintained by Historic Scotland. For information, including free leaflets telephone 0131 668 8600.

Our data service website contains details of scheduled monuments and has GIS datasets available to download:  
<http://data.historic-scotland.gsi.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 leaflet on *Treasure Trove in Scotland* is available from the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes*, on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stonecleaning, are available; Catalogue from and orders to: Historic Scotland Conservation Group  
Tel: 0131 668 8638 e-mail: [hs.cgpublications@scotland.gov.uk](mailto:hs.cgpublications@scotland.gov.uk)

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