

# FUTURE THINKING on Carved Stones in Scotland



**Sally Foster, Katherine Forsyth, Susan Buckham and Stuart Jeffrey** invite us to 'listen to the stones' and explore the significance and potential of Scotland's carved stone monuments through a new online resource

**M**ute stones can speak volumes to us all, if we choose to listen, and Scotland has these in abundance: prehistoric carvings in living rock and on monuments; Roman altars, dedication slabs and statuary; early Christian cross-marked stones, Pictish symbol-stones, cross-slabs and free-

standing crosses; gravestones, tomb sculpture and burial monuments of all periods; medieval and modern architectural sculpture including sundials and fountains; and public monuments such as war memorials and modern carved sculpture.

Our appreciation of the past relies heavily on the survival of stone monuments, buildings and landscape features. They

**Gravestones of medieval and later date at Kilmore churchyard, Dervaig, Isle of Mull**

shape our sense of place and identity. If carved, this adds further dimensions and depth to that appreciation and can tell us much more about past peoples, their identities, beliefs, tastes, technologies and lives. If we understand the significance of these monuments, by thinking and working in 'joined-up' ways, then we can release their potential to tell us about the past.

This was our motivation for co-ordinating the production of *Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland: A Research Framework*, now published online as part of the Scottish Archaeology Research Framework (ScARF) in collaboration with the National Committee on Carved Stones in Scotland (NCCSS).

This highly visual resource aims to link, inspire, mobilise and direct the efforts of anyone with an interest in carved stone monuments in Scotland. It is driven by a desire for a more strategic approach to the opportunities and challenges carved stone monuments present.

Despite including some of Scotland's most iconic monuments and most significant contributions to European art and culture, the significance of this resource is often not fully recognised, nor is the seriousness of the threats to it.

The NCCSS takes the view that addressing the underlying causes of both these problems requires targeted research into what carved stones can tell us about both the past (their historical context) and the present (social value, national and community identity). Research is needed also into curatorial issues, including the identification of best practice: for example, auditing and monitoring the resource, techniques of conservation and management, display and interpretation, and the role of new technologies in all of these.

The heart of the Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland project was a series of workshops to take stock of existing and ongoing research and to identify priorities for future research. Priority was given to two specific

areas that seemed particularly pressing or potentially fruitful. First, digital recording technology, a field where Scotland aspires to play a leading role, but in which the emphasis to date has been on data capture rather than research.

Second, carved stones associated with churches, where so many are inevitably found. This is because changes in the role of churches within local communities, specifically accelerating redundancy and changes of ownership, present particular threats to carved stones, while increasing use of heritage as a means of community regeneration offers welcome opportunities.

A third workshop attracted 65 participants from England, the Isle of Man, Scotland and Wales who identified the issues of interest to them. Subsequently, when it came to preparing the research framework for publication, over 30 contributors supplied invaluable ideas, advice, images and text, not least in the form of nearly 40 individual case studies.

### The online resource

In the research framework we have interpreted 'carved stone monuments' in a broad and inclusive manner, aware that the boundaries of this category are indistinct. By 'carving' we understand the use of tools to remove part of the stone surface, using any of a range of techniques, including pecking, grinding, gouging, cutting, chiselling, scratching and polishing. The stones in question may thus be incised, carved in various degrees of relief, or entirely sculptural.

The level of technical skill and artistic ambition exhibited ranges greatly. At one end of the spectrum are highly accomplished public artworks created by teams of professional sculptors, at the other extreme are informal carvings, scratch art, and graffiti created by ordinary people, including children, for perhaps little more than personal enjoyment.

Similarly, we use the term 'monument' somewhat loosely to convey the principle that the item should be or have been earthfast or

otherwise tied to a specific location.

So, what will you find? After an introduction that describes our approach, the current state of knowledge of carved stones is critically assessed, as is heritage and conservation in relation to carved stone monuments. This review is broadly chronological (many people do want to focus on a particular period or theme, and historically speaking this is a more familiar approach to carved stones) and is a great starting place for understanding what we already know and what issues arise from this knowledge, not least where the gaps in our understanding lie.

But when it comes to the way forward we adopted a thematic approach, on the basis that this better reflects the ways that carved stones are used and approached in practice, and therefore this offers the best hope of making a difference: creating knowledge and understanding, understanding value, securing for the future, and engaging and experiencing. This is also an approach that celebrates and embraces the multi-period, multi-theme and multi-disciplinary nature of carved stone study and mitigates against narrow and blinkered 'silo' thinking.

An overarching approach to carved stones offers the opportunity for a new way of thinking about them, without adhering to any established and outmoded frame of reference. In many ways carved stones are a touchstone for wider attitudes to the historic environment and to heritage practices because they cross so many boundaries and therefore expose so many issues. They invite, indeed demand, interdisciplinary and cross-cutting approaches.

There is a merit to looking outside of what we are familiar with to identify new methods and questions. Those working on gravestones can learn from those working on prehistoric rock carvings, and vice versa. The opportunities for cross-fertilisation are not just theoretical but also technical and practical. Issues such as erosion and how to best conserve and present carved



From top: AOC Archaeology's digital scanning of the prehistoric rock art at Ormaig near Kilmartin; Pictish Eagle Stone, Strathpeffer

stones, or how to record them, are hardly period-specific. That is not to say that different types of carvings do not have some particular problems.

The framework ends with a vision for the future, considering what success will look like. It is accompanied by extensive bibliographies, which offer a useful resource in their own right, detailed summaries of the workshops and, of course, the splendid range of short case studies we were offered. These illustrate many facets of the diversity, significance and potential of carved stones, including their significance to contemporary society and communities.



**Above: Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland project banner**

**Left: Nigel Ruckley tests the geology of carved stones on the Isle of Oronsay**

**Below, left: Moray Burial Research Group recording buried tombstones at Birnie churchyard**



Overall, the framework's structure is designed to draw out a holistic understanding of the value and significance of Scotland's carved stone heritage in the 21st century, and reflect on what this knowledge then offers us. This emphasis on the different ways in which carved stones are valued provides the best hope of making a difference, to carved stone studies and to the multiple communities that treasure them. To this end the framework identifies research principles, problems, practices, and ideas for projects, some enhancing existing initiatives and others suggesting new directions.

Materiality, cultural biography and landscape recur as particularly helpful lenses for exploring carved stones and their context, while it is clear that digital technology still has considerable future potential to answer our questions.

**The future**

The online resource has a wiki-format, meaning users can continue to breathe life into it so that it continues to reflect current practice and research priorities as these inevitably develop over time. We hope, then, that this is just the beginning of a process of broadening engagement. Ongoing communication and capacity

building is crucial.

There is much existing data, research, knowledge, experience and enthusiasm across the many existing communities of interest that can be readily brought together and utilised. We do not claim to have captured everything! But new directions and more significant investments of effort in particular areas are also needed. There is a role for everyone... for starters, we look forward to you reading *Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland* and adding your comments and ideas online.

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Website: [www.carvedstones.scot](http://www.carvedstones.scot)



**FURTHER READING**

*Future Thinking on Carved Stones in Scotland: A Research Framework* can be accessed (and downloaded from) <http://scot.sh/hscarved>

