

The cup-and-ring marked rocks at **Achnabreck** are among the most impressive in Scotland.

# INVESTIGATING THE ACHNABRECK CUP- AND-RING MARKED ROCK

Information for Teachers



EDUCATION



INVESTIGATING HISTORIC SITES



### Achnabreck rock art

If you look down at your feet when walking in some areas of Scotland, you may come across rock slabs and boulders which have been carved with hollows ('cups') and circular patterns ('rings'). There are over 100 of these examples of 'rock art' within a radius of six miles of Kilmartin in Argyll. We cannot tell exactly who carved the stones, nor exactly when they were made, because the same patterns were used over a wide time span. The oldest carvings may date from around 4,000 BC, and the same designs were used until around 1,500 BC. Patterns on the same rock slab may have been carved by different people, hundreds of years apart.

The rock art at Achnabreck is one of Scotland's most impressive and extensive cup-and-ring marked rocks, and the 500m walk there from the carpark helps to set the rock in a natural context, even although the landscape has changed since the time it was carved.

### Practical information

- Location: Signposted off the A816 outside Cairnbaan, 2 miles north of Lochgilphead.
- Parking: Large car park available.
- Access: 500m walk to the stone up a track through woods.
- Note: The rock is fenced in for conservation reasons. Please remind pupils that they should not walk on or touch the rocks. The discussion points which follow are based on a viewpoint from just below the first rock slab you come across.

## How to use this resource

This resource is designed to enable teachers or parent helpers carry out a simple investigation of the Achnabreck cup-and-ring marked rock. Simple discussion points focus pupils' attention on what they can see and encourage pupils to interpret this evidence.

This activity guide should be used in collaboration with the much larger full-colour booklet *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009. This is available free of charge to teachers from Historic Scotland and can also be downloaded from the Historic Scotland website. This booklet sets the carved stones at Achnabreck in the context of other early carved stones and provides a wealth of additional suggestions for pre-visit, on-site and post-visit activities.

Call **0131 668 8793/8736** or visit [www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk) for more details.

### Suggested activities

- On site, spend some time recording what can be seen. Pupils can sketch the rocks and the location of the patterns on them. They can take estimated measurements using tape measures or pieces of string to record the dimensions. They can draw or photograph patterns, perhaps with each child or group taking responsibility for certain clusters of pattern.
- Can the patterns be grouped or sorted in any way? Perhaps by developing their own system of organising patterns, pupils could log which patterns are shown, and how many

there are of each (e.g. how many single cups, how many rows of cups, how many rings are there in a circle pattern on average etc).

- What's it like here now? Record the surroundings through photography, sketching, recorded oral responses. What can you see now that people 5,000 years ago would not have seen? Remind pupils that the landscape is likely to have changed since early times, not just because of human activity but also because of variations in the climate.
- As you walk back, get pupils to think about how people 5,000 years ago might have used the natural materials around you.
- Back at school, pupils could 'carve' their own versions of the patterns in clay slabs which could be fired to make a permanent display in the playground. The patterns could also be used as a stimulus for printmaking or other work in the expressive arts.
- Back at school, pupils could develop imaginative writing which features this carved rock and their explanation of its purpose.

### Further reading

Historic Scotland Education, *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009.

Rachel Butter, *Kilmartin: an introduction and guide to Scotland's richest prehistoric landscape*, Kilmartin House Trust 1999.



### Did you know...

Rock art is found all over the world. Similar patterns showing cups, rings, circles and spirals have been found carved into stones in Scotland, England, Ireland, Brittany, Spain, Scandinavia and Italy!

## Background information

*This may be read aloud to pupils either before the visit or on site.*

- This rock was carved around 5,000 years ago by the people who lived in this area.
- There are more than 100 carved rocks like this around here. They are known as 'cup-and-ring marked' rocks.
- No one knows for sure what carved rocks like this were for. It might have been a territory marker, or a place for religious ceremonies. It might have been a map, or marking a place where something important happened.
- More carved rock slabs like this are found every year. Who knows what could lie buried under grass or moss!



*The rock shows a wide range of carved marks*



## Discussion points



**Details of cup and ring marks**

**Teacher prompts**

Look at the rock. What different kinds of patterns can you see?

**Pupil responses**

- ‘cups’ – little dips carved in the rock.
- rows of cups.
- ‘rings’ – carved circles, and circles within circles.
- lines connecting groups of carvings.
- lines running across groups of circles.

How many sets of circles can you count from here?

- 25 + (depending on viewpoint).

Do they look like anything? What do they remind you of?

Pupils’ own responses – ripples in water etc.

Do the patterns overlap at all?

Yes, in some cases.

Historians think that people added patterns to this rock over many years, so sometimes newer patterns were carved on top of old ones.

Why do you think the carvers used this rock?

It would depend on why they were carving in the first place – but from a purely practical point of view, it is a big slab of rock, easy to get at, not too steep.

Can you see any places where the carvers have used or avoided natural features in the rocks as part of their patterns?

Circles are generally between the cracks in the rock.

Is the rock wet at all today? If so, how does this affect the patterns?

Water runs through the patterns, making them glint.

Some people think that the patterns were specifically designed near water so that they would sparkle when they were wet.

Walk around the rock. Can you see any other patterns?

Similar sets of patterns can be seen elsewhere.

Are they the same or different to the first group of patterns?

Look around you. Do you get a good view from here? What can you see? Do you think this place would have been important to early people?

Good viewpoint. Might have been important for defensive reasons, or simply to be able to look out. Must have been important to have the carving.

There are no carvings from this time in Scotland which show people, animals or other objects we can recognise. Why do you think the carvers did not carve these things?

Pupils’ own ideas. Maybe no need to carve familiar things.



What do you think the carvings were for?

Pupils' own ideas. Some of the many suggestions for their use include:

- Meeting place markers.
- Sites marking good pastures or watering holes for cattle.
- Territory markers.
- Maps.
- Sites for religious ceremonies .
- Markers indicating the site of an important event – perhaps a death or a hunt scene.
- Evidence of a written language.
- Simply decoration.
- The patterns are irrelevant – the carvers were extracting crushed stone for another purpose.

