

Kilmartin Glen

Words & photos by
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The site of many hundreds of ancient monuments, Kilmartin Glen is one of Scotland's richest prehistoric landscapes. Here, award-winning photographer and long-time Celtic Life International contributor Tom Langlands looks at the history and significance of this mysterious place.

In a churchyard in the village of Kilmartin, Argyll, stand some of the oldest carved gravestones in Scotland. Intricate patterns chiselled on slabs of rock 800 years ago provide subtle clues about those long departed and give death a sense of poignancy. Standing by these ancient stones and gazing across the landscape of Kilmartin Glen, it is evident that carving stones and marking the landscape is an inherent part of this special location. Journey through the mists of this glen and you travel through time to prehistory and the birth of a nation.

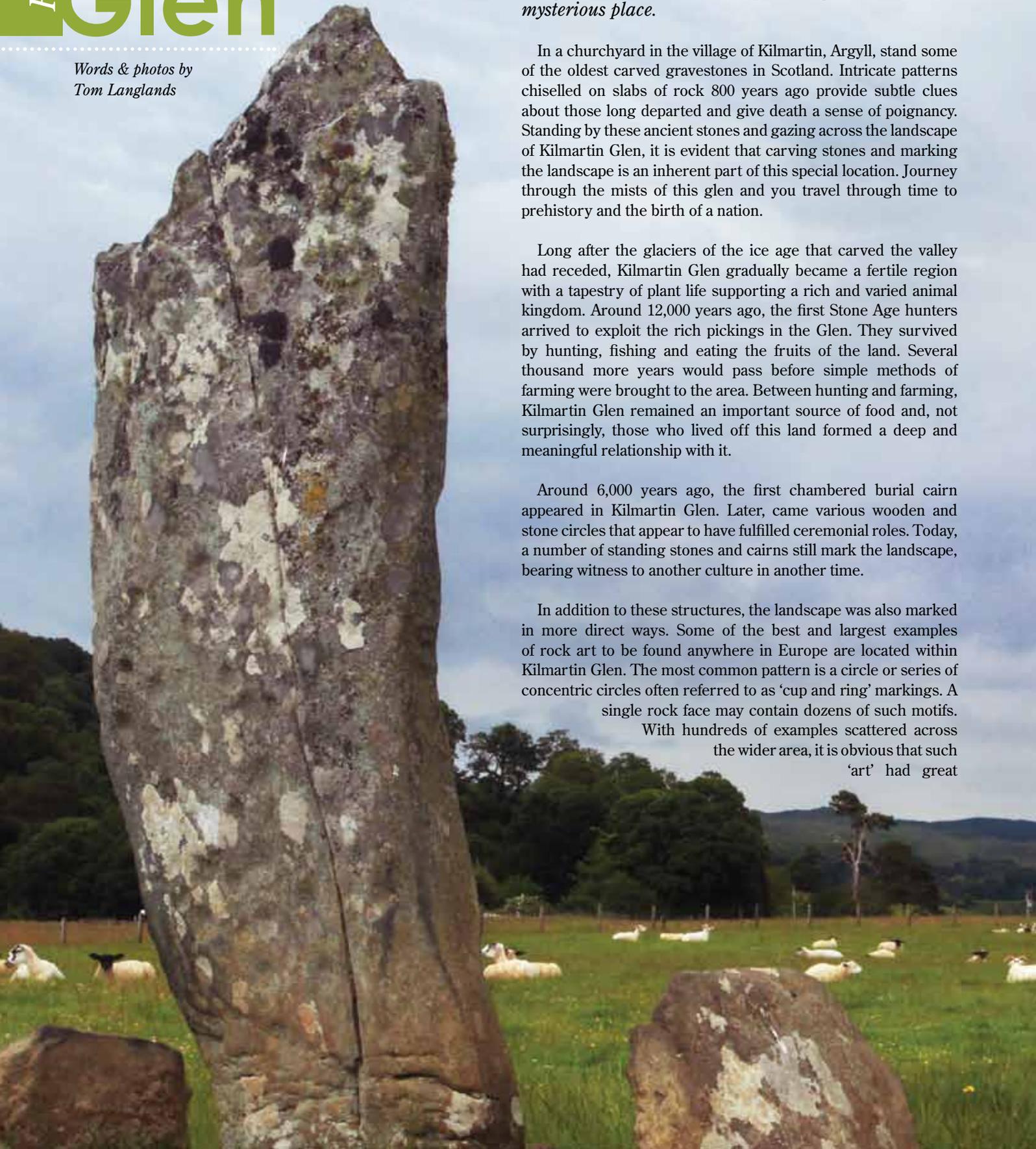
Long after the glaciers of the ice age that carved the valley had receded, Kilmartin Glen gradually became a fertile region with a tapestry of plant life supporting a rich and varied animal kingdom. Around 12,000 years ago, the first Stone Age hunters arrived to exploit the rich pickings in the Glen. They survived by hunting, fishing and eating the fruits of the land. Several thousand more years would pass before simple methods of farming were brought to the area. Between hunting and farming, Kilmartin Glen remained an important source of food and, not surprisingly, those who lived off this land formed a deep and meaningful relationship with it.

Around 6,000 years ago, the first chambered burial cairn appeared in Kilmartin Glen. Later, came various wooden and stone circles that appear to have fulfilled ceremonial roles. Today, a number of standing stones and cairns still mark the landscape, bearing witness to another culture in another time.

In addition to these structures, the landscape was also marked in more direct ways. Some of the best and largest examples of rock art to be found anywhere in Europe are located within Kilmartin Glen. The most common pattern is a circle or series of concentric circles often referred to as 'cup and ring' markings. A

single rock face may contain dozens of such motifs.

With hundreds of examples scattered across the wider area, it is obvious that such 'art' had great



significance in the lives of these people. Despite much research and many theories, there is no conclusive answer regarding the purpose or meaning of these elaborate carvings. This is still one of the great mysteries and attractions of the Glen.

Sharon Webb, Director and Curator of Kilmartin House Museum and author of *In the Footsteps of Kings: a new guide to walks in and around Kilmartin Glen*, said the carvings intrigue visitors.

“What prompted prehistoric people to begin marking rocks with motifs, and what the meaning behind these actions was, is something that fascinates many people who come to the Glen,” Webb said.

Towards the southern end of the Glen, a rocky hill stands in the middle of the flat valley floor. On its summit are other marked rocks, and one of particular interest is shaped and hollowed to accept a human foot. Standing here, with one foot placed firmly in the rock, it is possible to survey a vast area of the surrounding land, and it is in this way that kingly status was ceremoniously granted to important individuals. This was the royal fortress of Dunadd, and the kingdom of the Gaelic-speaking Dál Riata lay all around. In this place, the first shoots of the Scottish nation appear, but its roots are firmly planted in nearby Ireland.

The centre of the Gael culture was in County Antrim in the north of Ireland, although there was a Gael presence and shared language with the islands and coastline of western Scotland. The Romans referred to these early Irish and Scottish Gaels by the derogatory name of Scoti or Scotti. This term was later used to describe Gaels generally. Total Gael domination of the area is attributed to Fergus Mór mac Eirc, from County Antrim, who invaded Argyll around 1,500 years ago and established the hill fort at Dunadd as his power base. Lying in the middle of the Móine Mhór or the ‘big bog’, the fort was a well-positioned stronghold that enjoyed connections to the wider world by way of the adjacent River Add.

As the Dál Riata influence expanded, Dunadd became a major trade and political centre within the kingdom. Strategic alliances were made on this hill.

Exotic goods, fine wines and precious metals were imported and beautiful jewellery was crafted here.

Dunadd and the Kingdom of Dál Riata were extremely important, Webb said.

“It was a kingdom that stretched over Northern Ireland and Scotland at a time when the separate nations of Scotland and Ireland were not yet conceived of. Dunadd was for many years the ceremonial, administrative and in some senses, spiritual centre of the kingdom, it was the place where kings were literally ‘made’. The kingdom was eventually united with the Pictish kingdom to form the nation of Scotland, which took its Gaelic language from the people of Dál Riata.”

As the Gaelic influence of the Dál Riata spread, so did the more general use of Scoti or Scotti to describe the wider population, eventually giving rise to the modern name of the people and their country as ‘Scottish’ and ‘Scotland’.

Back in Kilmartin churchyard, I wondered if the Glen still has secrets to reveal. Webb has no doubt.

“Oh yes, for example, excavations in the 1990s revealed previously unknown burial and ritual monuments, including a cursus¹, and Scotland’s largest timber circle. We have a rolling research programme that continues to shed light on the history of the Glen,” she said.

Leaving, I take a last glance at this mesmerizing place and contemplate how much man has marked this landscape and how much this landscape has carved a nation.

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