

NOTES ON STONE CIRCLES IN BRITAIN/SCOTLAND

Many of the largest and most imposing circles were the work of native farming communities of the third millennium BC at a time in the Neolithic or new Stone Age prior to arrival of Beaker people.

Stone circles were enclosures. Some of them contained huge circular ditches or rings of stones or posts surrounding a mortuary house where the dead were laid.

With the growth of population in the late Neolithic (Neolithic: 4000-2500BC.) larger, open enclosures were needed for the communal ceremonies and it may have been from about 3500BC that the first great megalithic rings and henges were erected. The earliest carbon 14 assay comes from Lochmaben Stone, Gretna Green at c.3278BC, which is contemporary with some of the first henges, built in lowland Britain. Stone circles may have been the counterparts of henges in highland areas where the land was hard to dig and stone plentiful.

About 1000 rings still exist.

Early Stone Circles (3370 to 2670 BC)-Middle to Late Neolithic

Concentrating around the coasts of the Irish Sea and the sea-routes of the Atlantic from Ireland to Scotland, the circles were few but impressive. They were large, usually over 100feet (30.5 metres) in diameter, and were true circles although some had a flattened arc, possible due to the custom of several work gangs responsible for separate sections of the circumference.

Location of the rings suggest they were the creations of people engaged in the manufacture of stone axes during the middle and late Neolithic.

Many of the rings have closely set stones, very similar to the continuous banks of henges and like them broken by a conspicuous entrance, which in the case of stone circles was defined by two pairs of stones or taller pillars. All were built of local stone dragged to the site by man-power. It is possible that oxen were used but there is no evidence for this. Risk of damage to valuable animals.

Outside some of the early stone circles stood isolated monoliths. Some of these may have been erected in line with celestial events such as midsummer sunrise or midwinter sunset.

It is possible that prehistoric societies, much concerned with death and fertility, incorporated sightlines to the sun or moon in the design of their ritual monuments by raising such gnomonic pillars. However, the early circles were too crudely built to be refined observatories and their content of human bone suggest dedicatory/sacrificial nature of the rites that went on inside.

Open interiors, low-lying positions (often in valleys and near rivers or lakes) and great size all point to purpose as being meeting places for communal ceremonies. Traces of fire and of human bone have been found but not complete skeletons. Cremated pockets of bone may indicate that such relics were vital dedications. * Possibility of a widespread form of ancestry cult.

The Middle Period (c.2670 to 1975BC)-Late Neolithic to Early Bronze age

This period coincided with the commencement of metallurgy and arrival of the Beaker People. This is the time when many of the most perfect rings were built. Stone circles were constructed wherever there was farming land and outcrops of rock.

Some of the new rings were enormous, extending to diameters of 250 feet (76 metres). The designers seem to have attempted to construct elegant shapes: circles, flattened circles and true ovals. There was a tendency towards a preferred number of stones in each region irrespective of the size of the rings-which gives a hint of elementary numeracy amongst these early societies.

At this time in southern Britain there were only infrequent burial associations, in the north and west it was usual to have a cairn, a barrow or a cist inside the ring*. Death and stone circles were closely linked. The origins of the recumbent stone, cup marks, the interest in lunar alignments and the deposits of cremated bone reveal that whatever occurred in these rings was probably derived from the Neolithic burial rites. In the same way it is possible that in the south the 3-sided settings of stones known as Coves were symbolic representations of megalithic tomb entrances.

Late stone circles (c.1975 to 1200 BC)-Early to Middle Bronze Age

This was the period when most stone circles were erected. Ovals predominate but the sites are so small, rarely exceeding 60 feet (18 metres) that frequently it is difficult to differentiate between a good oval and a poor circle. Many of the sites were so close together that both their size and their proximity suggest that they were the creations of individual families. The weight of the stones supports this line of thought: few are megalithic and most could easily have been raised by a few men and women.

In northern Scotland rings were rare but instead there were multiple rows of tiny stones climbing uphill towards round cairns. In central Scotland ovals of 6 or 8 stones intermingled with diminutive rectangles, known as Four-Posters, which almost invariably contained an urned creation. *

*Others might have been later insertions.

The association between burial-cairn and circle was stronger in this period than earlier times, whether in the Caithness rings like Aberscross with its cist and half-burned arm bones, or in the Peak District of England, where people lit a fire inside the embanked ring at Barbrook after they had placed a cremation in a cup marked cist.

On Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, around Loch Roag, separate groups put up several rings, all different in shape, size and architecture. The most famous being the dramatic Callanish with its radiating avenue and unfinished rows. Although its central pillar was 17 feet long (5 metres) it was less than 7 tons in weight and could have been hauled upright by 20 or 30 people.

This ring has a burial-one of the smallest chambered tombs in the British Isles was squashed inside the circles.

There is no evidence that any stone circle was built in the British Isles after 1000BC. A deterioration in the climate caused the abandonment of many upland rings, and changes in religious belief may have led to the neglect of others. The latest known date for any circle is c.1200 BC (Cashelkeety, Co Kerry, Ireland) that was deserted shortly after construction due to the rains and growing peat.

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