



Like timber circles and henges (see Factsheets 11 and 12), stone circles belong to a tradition of circular monuments that span the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age. With the earliest dating to around 3000 BC the end of the tradition is more difficult to date but is accepted as being at the end of the 2nd millennium BC. They are distributed across the whole of the British Isles and though they are concentrated in the North and West, there are notable stone circles in lowland areas and even in areas where local stone is rare: most notably at Stonehenge. Stone circles often coincide with timber circles and henges. At Machrie Moor, Arran and the Sanctuary, Wiltshire, the timber rings were replaced by stones and at Arbor Low, Derbyshire, and Avebury, Wiltshire, the stone circles were enclosed by henges. Such circle-henges as they are known, tend to run down the spine of Britain at the junction between the Highland and Lowland zones.

In size, stone circles vary considerably from small sites a few metres across at, for example, the Four Stones, Powys to Stanton Drew, Somerset at 112 m in diameter or even the outer stone circle at Avebury some 330 m in diameter. The height of the stones also varies considerably from 5 m high at Stenness in Orkney to some Welsh and Irish sites where the stones barely peep above the surface of the turf. In all cases, the stones are spaced with gaps between them and they do not form solid rings. The circles are often also irregular having oval, elliptical and flattened circumferences.

There are regional variations in stone circles. The Recumbent Stone Circles of Aberdeenshire are noted for having a large flat stone flanked by two uprights. The top of the recumbent stone is always horizontal and the stones decrease in height as they move away from the recumbent. On Tayside but extending to northern England and with outliers in Wales, are small circles comprising only 4 stones. These Four Posters may have central cairns and date to the Bronze Age.

The construction of stone circles is notoriously difficult to date as it relies on diagnostic or

organic material being found at the base of the stoneholes. Finds from the interior cannot always be used to date the stone rings as there is often little in the way of a physical relationship that can be used to relate the one to the other and as a result all that can usually be dated is a broad period when the circle was in use. An exception to this is the stone circle of Balbirnie, Fife that has been recently dated from deposits of cremated human bone in both the stoneholes and the interior. Here some 15 radiocarbon dates demonstrate that the circle was constructed around 3000 BC. What was happening at the site immediately after its construction has left no archaeological traces but then around 2000 BC cists started to be constructed in the interior and these also contained deposits of cremated human bone. Around 1600 BC the site seems to have been 'closed' by the construction of a cairn, again with cremated bone, in the centre of the monument and covering the cists. Even if episodic, this circle was the focus of rituals for one and a half millennia and it is unlikely that Balbirnie is unique.

It was originally thought that the large open stone circles were amongst the earliest and that the small burial-orientated sites of the Bronze Age were the latest but analysis of radiocarbon dates suggests that this is no longer tenable. Instead, it would appear that the smaller simple sites persist throughout the currency of stone circles but that the larger ones are restricted to the middle of the period. If this is the case, then it would appear that the development of stone circles closely resembles henges and timber circles.

As mentioned above regarding Balbirnie, the functions of stone circles can be difficult to interpret from archaeological data alone. Certainly some receive burials but as can be seen at the Balbirnie, the burials in the central area may be considerably later than the circle itself. It is generally assumed that they are meeting places, perhaps used seasonally by local or more dispersed groups, and it has also been suggested that the actual act of constructing the

circle, obtaining and transporting the stones as well as setting them in position, may have involved people in group enterprises that served to strengthen bonds between neighbours. Traces of fires have been found in many circles suggesting elements of pyro-ritual activity.

Prehistoric astronomy is often applied to stone circles but this can be tricky as, being circles, they look out over a full 360 degrees of horizon and identifying focal stars or planets can be dangerous. The Recumbent Stone Circles of Aberdeenshire, however, have their recumbent stones consistently in the WSW–SSE arcs suggesting an orientation on the midsummer moon. This does not infer lunar worship but only observation perhaps to mark certain times of the year. Stonehenge has a well-known solar orientation and the midwinter sun sets between the uprights of the largest of the inner horseshoe of trilithons. The orientation is specific and accurate. Once again it may be more

calendrical, marking a time of year that demands ritual activity, than a sign of solar worship.

Further Reading

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Nine Ladies, Stanton Moor, Derbyshire



Glassel, Aberdeenshire



Balbirnie, Fife



Killin, Perthshire



East Aquhorthies Recumbent stone circle, Aberdeenshire



Stones of Stenness, Orkney

All photographs by Alex Gibson

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