

## Introduction to Stone Circles

### Definition

The term stone circle is used to describe a variety of monuments found in Ireland and Britain, which date to the Bronze Age. What they all have in common is that they take the form a circle defined by individual stones set apart from each other. Some of them are unique, like Stonehenge in Wiltshire. Others belong to groupings, which share common characteristics.

### Date

The date of stone circles has been established from radiocarbon dates derived from archaeological excavations. These place their construction in and around the second millennium BC (2,000 - 1,000 BC). This period is known as the Bronze Age.

### Purpose

A characteristic that all stone circles have in common, is that they do not seem to serve a utilitarian function. They are not houses, places of industry or serve any such practical purpose. In truth, it will probably never be known what their exact function was because they were built in prehistoric times and that information has long since been lost. But that doesn't mean they are not worth studying—by applying archaeological techniques to their study we can find out a lot about the Bronze Age people who built them. Archaeologists describe these as 'ritual monuments,' places where some form of ritual or ceremony took place.

### The Magic Circle

One clue to the function of these monuments is their shape—a circle. The circle is a universal symbol for wholeness, renewal and perfection. It is also a symbol of God especially the Sun God. In Astrology a circle portrays the sun. Is this why the stones are placed in a circle?

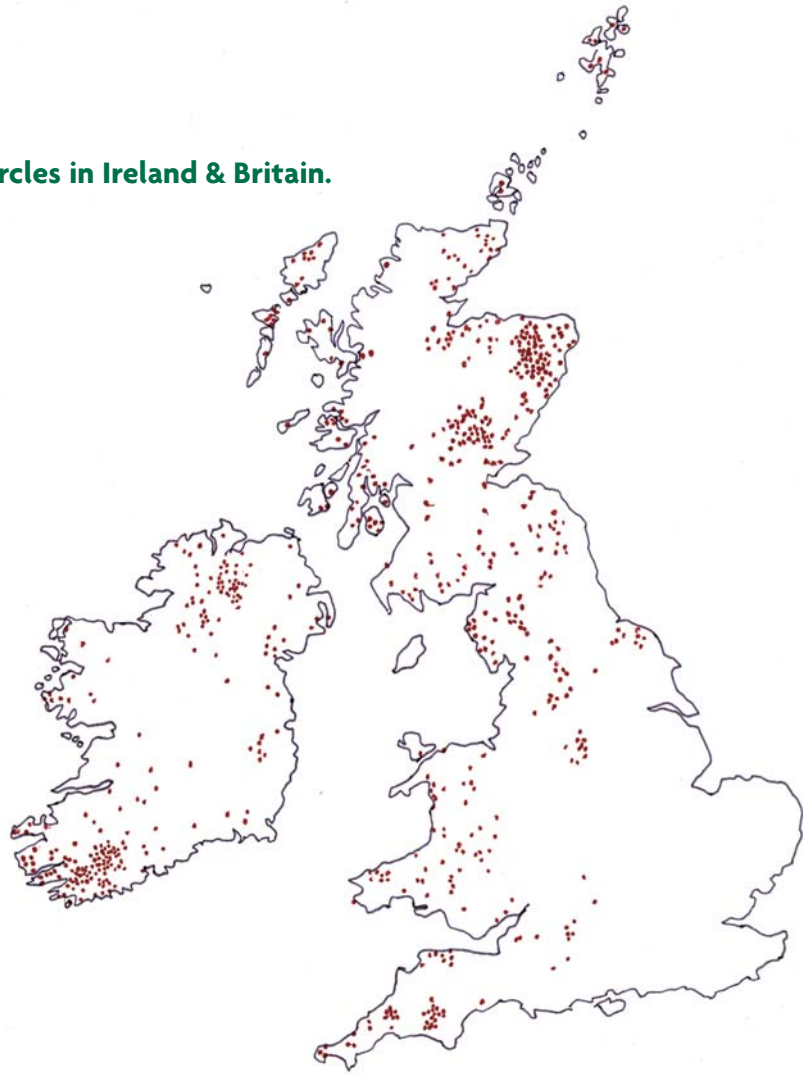
### Distribution: (see *figure 1* on next page)

One of the first things archaeologists use when looking at a monument type is to make a distribution map, showing the location of all known types. What does the distribution map of stone circles in Britain and Ireland tell us?

- Not present everywhere—very few in South-eastern England or the Irish Midlands.
- In some places they are well scattered, like South-west Scotland and Wales.
- In other places we can see a distinct concentration, especially in four areas: Aberdeenshire and Perth & Kinross areas of Scotland, and Mid-Ulster and the South-west of Ireland.

**Fig 1 : Distribution of Stone Circles in Ireland & Britain.**

- **Stone Circles**



### The Stone Circles of Cork and Kerry

Without doubt the greatest concentration of stone circles in Ireland is in the South Kerry/ West Cork area. Some 110 examples have been recorded in this area and they all conform to the same general pattern.

- They get the name *Recumbent Stone Circles* because all the stones in the circle are narrow upright stones except for one. This stone is set on its side—is recumbent—and is usually has a flattish top. Archaeologists now term these recumbent stones as the Axial Stone of the circle. This Axial Stone is always set at the south-western side of the circle.
- Opposite the Axial Stone, at the north-western side of the circle, are the two tallest stones in the circle, called the Entrance Stones. These are often set radially to the circle, i.e. with their sides facing into the circle. In some instances there are a further two stones directly outside the Entrance Stones, emphasising it's function as a “way in”.
- The rest of the stones are then set around in a circle between the Entrance Stones and the Axial Stone, grading down in size from the tall Entrance Stones to the low Axial Stone.
- There is always an uneven number of stones in the circle. The smallest have only five stones whilst the largest has nineteen.
- The stones are placed roughly equidistant apart around the circle.
- Except for the Entrance Stones the rest are set with their long-axis along the line of the circumference of the circle.

## Worship

### The act of worship

Profound devotion to a god/gods/goddess is a feature of all human societies. This worship is usually a communal activity, taking the form of a ritualised ceremony. This act of worship is usually led by a special “holy person(s)” and performed at a special place, structure or building.

### Iron Age Celtic Worship (500 BC - 400 AD)

The Bronze Age is followed by the Iron Age. This period in Ireland is associated with the Celts though it is a debatable matter whether the Celts themselves (i.e., the people Caesar met in Gaul and Southern Britain) ever came to Ireland but their language and culture certainly did. We know that the Celts’ lives were dominated by their religious beliefs; their gods were ever present in the natural and supernatural world. The gods had to be appeased and mollified by means of offerings, by correct rituals and by the proper manner of behaviour. Superstition played a big part in their lives—there was a right way and a wrong way of doing things—they also believed in lucky days and unlucky days. You offended the gods at your peril!

The Celts divided the year into four parts, Bealtaine (starting 1st May) and Samhain (starting 1st November), Imbolog (starting 1st February) and Lughnasa (starting 1st August), which roughly coincide with the four seasons of modern times. These dates were marked by annual events and rituals. Many of these were subsequently absorbed into the Christian calendar—as were ritual events like climbing to the top of holy mountains (Croagh Patrick; Mount Brandon) and visiting holy wells. Oiche Bealtaine, the Eve of May was a time of ceremony and celebration to mark the beginning of the growing season. Fires were lit on hilltops on the eve of Bealtaine, often interpreted as a symbolic gesture to welcome the new sun.

### Other Ritual Stone Monuments of the Bronze Age

There are also stones set in rows (3 or more stones set in a line), which are also orientated on certain lunar and celestial bodies. These too may represent ritual sites.

## Solstice and Equinox

The main characteristic of the climate at the latitude of Britain and Ireland is the changing nature of the seasons. The position on the horizon where the sun rises and sets every day varies throughout the year. At the mid-winter solstice, December 21st, it rises in the south-west and never rises very far into the sky. This gives us the shortest day in the year. At the spring equinox, March 20th, and the autumn equinox, September 22nd, the sun rises exactly in the east and sets exactly in the west, giving a day equally divided between day and night, twelve hours each. At the mid-summer solstice, June 21st, the sun will rise early in the north-east, rise high into the sky, and set late in the north-west, giving the longest day in the year. This variation in the length of the day over the year was one of the main reasons for an interest in the movements of the sun in prehistoric times.

### Winter Solstice

For farmers the shortest day of the year is a significant turning point. The sun gets stronger and days get longer from then on. The heat of the sun is important to survival; lives depend on a good year of warmth, growth and bountiful harvest. A cold, wet year could mean disaster, famine and death. The alignment of the stone circle on the setting sun on the solstice shows us that this is an important event for Bronze Age farmers in West Cork. They performed some type of worshipping ceremony at this time. The presence of a fulacht fiadh adjacent to the circle suggests cooking or bathing or perhaps feasting and dancing took place as part of the ceremony.

In Central America native Indian cultures do a traditional dance at this time of year to bring back the sun.



### The Sun God

To many ancient cultures either the sun was god or the sun depended on god. In either case god—or the gods—had control over peoples lives through the action of the sun. In today's world farming is a very sophisticated activity and produces an abundance of reliable food throughout the year. But this cannot have been the case in Bronze Age Ireland. What happens when the crops fail and famine strikes? Whose fault is this? Why is the sun not working properly? Are the gods angry? These are the questions which must have often been asked in prehistoric times.