

Worship

LESSON 1

The Magic Ring



ARCHAEOLOGY
time in transition

IT'S ABOUT TIME 2

**Aim(s)**

To look at the archaeology of worship and provide the students with an understanding of the human need to worship.

**Objective(s)**

Students will add to their knowledge of worship by creating a Bronze Age stone circle.

**Time Period**

Bronze Age (2,000 - 500 BC)

**KEY INFORMATION****Lesson**

- Stone circles are found in western Europe.
- There are 240 known examples of stone circles in Ireland, these are concentrated in 2 main areas, Mid-Ulster and West-Cork/South-Kerry.
- For the purpose of this lesson we are looking at a specific group of stone circles that share common features, these are located in West-Cork and South-Kerry.

Context

- This is the period from 2,000 BC to 500 BC.
- This age is in prehistory—no written evidence exists for this period.
- By this stage knowledge of metalworking had reached Ireland.
- Copper and tin were being alloyed to make bronze.
- The countryside was heavily forested by comparison with today.
- Most people lived in farming communities scattered throughout the countryside.

**METHODOLOGY & MEDIUM**

- Floor Space
- Two Chairs
- Magnetic Compass
- North Sign
- Torch
- Portable Musical Instruments (Optional)
- **Student Handout** Stone Circles

**SECTIONS**

Section 1 Forming the Stone Circle

Section 2 Describing the Stone Circle

Section 3 Interpreting the Stone Circle

Section 4 Orientation of the Stone Circle

Section 5 A Significant Case Study

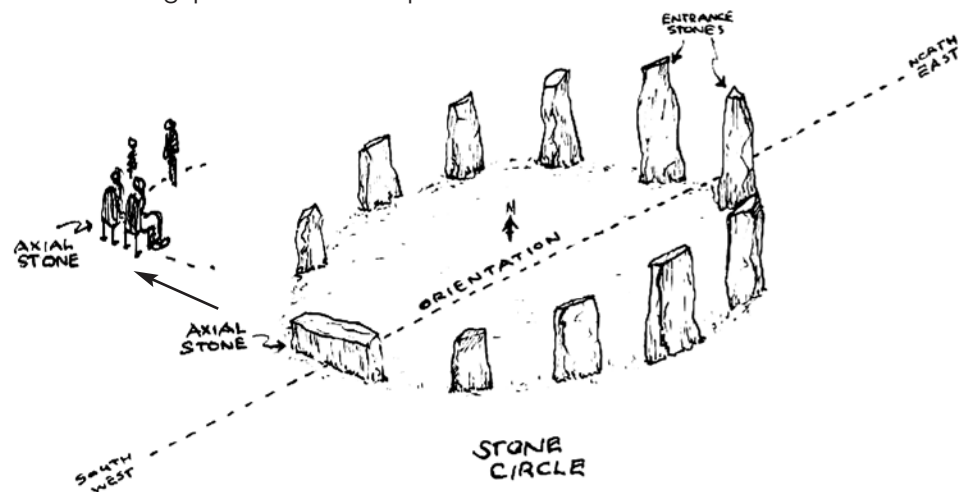


Key Question(s) How can we reconstruct a stone circle?



Teacher Instruction

1. Using your magnetic compass place the north sign in the middle of the floor space.
2. Place the two chairs on the south-west side of the proposed circle.
3. As Cork/Kerry stone circles have an uneven number of stones, depending on the class size number place either 1 or 2 students on the chair(s) to represent the Axial Stone.
4. Place the two tallest students (standing) opposite the *Axial Stone* on the north-east side of the circle.
5. Ask the rest of the students to form the circle grading in size on each side from the tallest down.
6. There should be a gap between each person.



Archaeological Terms

- Axial Stone is the term used by archaeologists for the flat-topped stone on the south-west side of a stone circle.
- Entrance Stones is the term used by archaeologists for the two tallest stones set on the north-east side of the stone circle.

SECTION 2 Describing the Stone Circle



Key Question(s) What are the main features of a stone circle?

In general, archaeologists look at monuments and artefacts under the following headings

- Form—shape and size.
- Fabric—materials used.
- Function.
- Date.

Let us examine the Form and Fabric of the Stone Circle.



Questions for Students

- **What shape is it?** Circular.
- **How many stones are in the circle?** Varies, but always has an uneven number of stones.
- **How are the stones placed—flat, upright, on their side?** All stones are upright with the exception of one, this is the Axial Stone to the south-west (represented by the seated students). It is the only stone in the circle on its side.
- **Are all the stones the same height?** No, the stones increase in height from the Axial Stone to the Entrance Stones (the two tallest stones).

SECTION 3 Interpreting the Stone Circle



Key Question(s) What does the design of the stone circle tell us?

Let us consider the various features we have noted about the stone circle.

Is there a significance to the monument being circular?

- The circle is a universal symbol for wholeness, renewal and perfection.
- In ancient mythology the circle is also a symbol of god especially the Sun God.
- In Astrology a circle portrays the sun.
- The circle is the observable shape of the sun and the moon when it is full.

Is there any significance to having an uneven number of stones?

- In the Cork/Kerry Stone Circles the smallest example has 5 stones, the largest 19 but always the number is uneven.
- Uneven numbers often have special significance e.g. Seven Wonders of the World; Seven Deadly Sins; Most team sports have an uneven number of players.
- Uneven numbers are often associated with superstitions e.g. Unlucky Thirteen.

What does the weight of the stones tell us?

- The people that built it devoted a lot of resources to its construction.
- They would only have gone to this effort if they were making something of importance to them.
- They were skilled enough to drag these large stones into position and set them upright in a certain way.
- The building of the stone circle was a communal activity.

The tallest stones served a purpose—what do you think that purpose was?

- The two tallest stones form an entrance.



Possible Discussion

- Why do you need an entrance?
- What does an entrance suggest?
- A way in? A way into what? A house? Is it a house? If not, why not?

Sometimes the tallest stones are at right angles to the circle—if the students are not interpreting it as an entrance ask the two tallest to face each other suggesting the idea of an entrance. In some cases a 2nd pair of stones stand outside the Entrance Stones emphasising that this is an entrance.

The Axial Stone is on its side and has a flat-top. Why do you think this is?

- The flat top suggests it functioned as some form of table. Lying on its side it is at the right height for such a purpose.

SECTION 4 Orientation of the Stone Circle



Key Question(s) What does the design of the stone circle tell us?



In using a torch the teacher may explore various possible orientations.

- Move outside of the circle (of students) to the west. Shine the torch towards the circle. This represents where the sun sets at each equinox (when the sun is over the equator).
- Move to the north-west of the circle. Shine the torch towards the circle. This represents the setting sun in mid-summer – summer solstice.
- Move to the south-west of the circle. Shine the torch towards the circle. This represents the setting sun in mid-winter – winter solstice.



Only when you are shining the torch from the south-west is it lined up with the Axial Stones and the Entrance Stones. This gives us the orientation of our stone circle. We can therefore deduce that it is orientated on the mid-winter sunset.

Let us examine the significance of the stone circle's orientation on the mid-winter solstice.



On the 21st of December each year at Drombeg Stone Circle in West-Cork the setting sun on the horizon is in a straight line between the Entrance Stones and Axial Stone.

- The mid-winter solstice marks the turning point of the year. From this time onward daylight is extended.
- Mid-winter solstice marks the birth of a new season and the promise of food for the coming year.
- In many cultures this turning point in the year is marked by festivity and celebration.



1,000 years before Drombeg Stone Circle was constructed, the people at Newgrange built a great tomb orientated to the mid-winter solstice at sunrise.

Prior to moving on to Section 5 summarise the key aspects of stone circles.

Key Aspects of Stone Circles

- Circular—the significance of the shape.
- The number of stones—uneven.
- Entrance Stones—the tallest stones.
- Axial Stone—flat-topped.
- Construction—time and effort.
- Orientation—linked to the sun.

Conclusion

Stone circles are special places marked by a significant number of varying size stones laid out in a specific shape with an entrance. Excavation of one of these circles (see Case Study) confirms that it is a special place with a floor, a trodden entrance and an unusual burial place in the centre, probably ritual. We can therefore draw the conclusion that stone circles are sacred places.

The morphology of the stone circle along with the excavated examples lead an archaeologist to conclude that they are places of Bronze Age worship most likely associated with the sun.





Key Question(s) How does archaeological excavation and interpretation add to our knowledge of stone circles?

The stone circle at Drombeg, near Rosscarberry in West Cork was excavated in the 1950s by Professor Fahy, UCC.

- What did he find?
- What does it tell us about the monument?

Main Findings

Finding The area outside the two **Entrance Stones** had a trampled surface.

Deduction The circle was entered and exited at this point on many occasions.

Interpretation Procession as part of ceremony; frequently used.

Finding The interior of the circle was covered by small compacted stones.

Deduction The small compacted stones represent a man-made floor.

Interpretation Interior of the circle was a special place.

Finding Directly under the floor, in the centre of the circle, was a pit which contained the cremated remains of a teenage person (the bones were too fragmentary to say whether male or female). The cremated bones were contained in a small pottery vessel. The pot had its base and rim broken off deliberately before being placed in the pit.

Deduction A ritual burial had taken place during the construction of the circle.

Interpretation The burial had a ceremonial nature (the ritual breaking of the pot) and the excavator considered it part of the construction of the circle as it was sealed under the floor. This enhanced the sacred nature of the circle.

WEB LINKS

WWW.



National Monuments Service
Megalithic Ireland
Stones of Ireland
Megaliths of Ireland
Megalithomania
Irish Stone Circles
The Megalith Map

www.archaeology.ie
www.megalithicireland.com
www.stonepages.com/ireland/ireland.html
www.beyond-the-pale.co.uk/genius.htm
www.megalithomania.com/
www.irishmegaliths.org.uk/seanchlocha4.htm
www.megalith.ukf.net/bigmap.htm



A Bronze Age Settlement

The Bronze Age in Ireland

- This is the period from 2,000 BC to 500 BC.
- By this stage knowledge of metalworking had reached Ireland.
- Copper and tin were alloyed to make bronze.
- The countryside was heavily forested by comparison with today.
- Most people lived in farming communities scattered throughout the countryside.
- Bronze Age people built stone circles for ritual purposes.



Drombeg Stone Circle

Stone Circles

Stone circles were built in the Bronze Age

- They have a circular shape but vary considerably in scale and in the number of stones in the circle.
- There are 240 in Ireland. They occur in two main groups—West Cork/South Kerry and Mid-Ulster, with a scatter in Limerick, Wicklow, Galway and Mayo.



Stone Circle

There are 110 stone circles in the West Cork/South Kerry group. They all conform to the same general pattern.

- All the stones in the circle are narrow upright stones except for one.
- One stone is set on its side on the SW side of the circle and is called the Axial Stone and usually has a flattish top.
- Opposite the Axial Stone are the two tallest stones in the circle, called the Entrance Stones.
- There are an uneven number of stones in the circle.

The stone circles in the Mid-Ulster group tend to be larger in diameter with the stones more even in size e.g. Bealtany Stone Circle, Co. Donegal is made of 64 stones (one missing) of similar size. There is a large slab on the south-west side with carved decorations. It is possibly orientated on the 6th of May sunrise. The stone circle is Bronze Age in date but was also in use in the Iron Age.

Grange Stone Circle in County Limerick is an exceptional stone circle (diameter 45.7m) with 113 contiguous stones (mainly limestone) with an outer broad earthen bank. The entrance is to the north east; opposite is a pair of large stones of conglomerate sandstone. A large stone on the north side is known as Crom Dubh. Crom Dubh was a mythological god of agriculture. People come here annually with offerings to Crom Dubh on Garland Sunday (Lughnasa).

A number of stone circles are orientated on significant astronomical events like the mid-winter solstice sunset e.g. Drombeg Stone Circle in West Cork. Their shape and form suggests they were places of worship.