

Ring cairn

Several generations after the stone ring was built the wild sparks of the fertility bonfires were replaced by the grey flames of funeral pyres. The ring of life and moonlight became a place for mourning and death as the bodies of important members of the group were consumed. In the morning the white bony fragments would have glinted dully among the dead embers of the pyre. The mourners returned to pick the splinters of bone from the cold ashes, and to clean and bury them in a new monument built within the old ring of standing stones.

This new monument was a low cairn with a central space in which had been dug a funnel-shaped pit that the mourners filled to the brim with charcoal and cremated bone. Over time, the mourners also placed deposits of cremated bone and fragments of pottery urns around the pit. Differences in the treatment of these separate deposits may indicate that the individuals met their death in different ways or that they were of different sexes or ages.

Within a few generations the site was abandoned for burials but its lichen-covered stones still retain a sense of awe and mystery.



Deeside circles

The stone circles of Deeside form a distinct group within Grampian. At sites such as Eslie the Greater (500m west of Nine Stanes), Clune Wood, Durris and Tomnaverie, Tarland, the recumbent lies east of south and usually inside the circumference of the ring. Nine Stanes is considered to have been erected later than many of the Grampian circles because its ring forms a flattened oval and the stones are not consistently graded in height. Recumbent stone circles are unique to Grampian Region; approximately 100 were erected from around 2500 BC to c1500 BC.

Moon ring

Four thousand years ago, a group of farmers and their families prepared a slight shelf on a stony hillside for the erection of a ring of stones. The site had been chosen for its broad views of the southern sky over the forest below. The massive red granite boulders that had been selected for the ring had to be dragged to the spot and levered into position. First of all came the irregular, whale-like recumbent, 16 tons in weight, then its two flanking pillars. All this effort by the community of small farmers was in order to mark the passing of the seasons by observing the moon in the southern sky caught in the frame of the great slab and its flanking pillars on the south of the ring.

The neighbours who congregated to mark these occasions may well have danced, feasted and practised fertility rituals in order to ensure the fruitfulness of their crops, animals and families. The milky moonlight would have been alive with sparks and flames, rhythmic drumming and gyrating figures.

Reaching the site

The Nine Stanes lie 3¼ miles south-east of Banchory, and 9½ miles west of Stonehaven in Forestry Commission woodland. Park in the old quarry 50m east of the gate and walk north through trees for c100m. Please respect this ancient site and follow the country code. (NGR NO 723 912).



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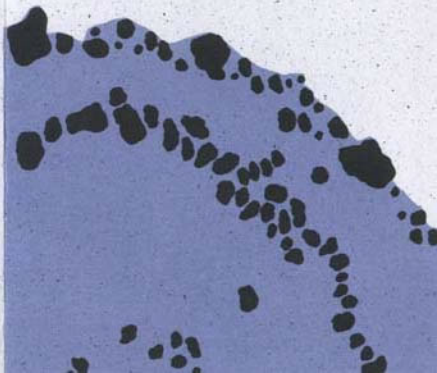


Planning and Economic Development
Department

Nine Stanes

Mulloch

*Seventh in a series of leaflets
on the Archaeology of N.E. Scotland*



THE NINE STANES

The ring originally consisted of 8 stones plus the recumbent and two flankers; one stone is missing on the north-west arc and another, on the west has been reduced to a stump. Hence the name, given when the ring was excavated early in the 20th century, includes the flankers but not the recumbent.

1 The stones have been graded in height on the east arc but not on the west. They are massive lumps of red granite, sunk no more than 406mm into the subsoil but all well packed round with stone fragments.

2 The circle is 17.5m east/west by 14.5m north/south and clearly flattened at the south-east.

3 The (unusually unevenly topped) recumbent is possibly of diorite and weighs over 16 tons. It sits well inside the circumference of the ring.

4 A stone which may have been an outlier to the ring lies 25m north-east. There may have been another, now removed, 23m to the south-south-east of the recumbent. Such stones may have been used for particular sightings.

5 A large ring cairn built within the earlier stone circle, flattened at the south-east where it linked with the recumbent. Overall 12m in diameter by 0.3m in height with a ruined boulder kerb and a central space. Note the kerb at right angles to the east end of the recumbent.

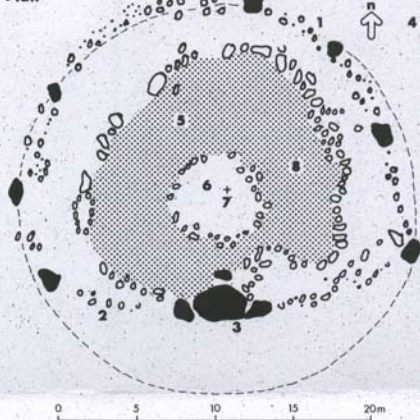


The recumbent from the north-east

Further Reading

- HAW Burl, *The Stone Circles of the British Isles*, Yale (1976).
FR Coles, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 39 (1904-05), 190-206.
A. Ritchie, *Scotland BC*, Edinburgh (1989).
IAG Shepherd, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Grampian*, Edinburgh (1986).
IAG Shepherd, 'The early peoples', in Omand D (ed), *The Grampian Book*, Golspie (1987).

Plan



6 The central space contained a funnel-shaped pit 660mm in diameter at its mouth, 254mm deep and 102mm in diameter at base. It was found to be 'full to the brim' of charcoal and cremated bone.

7 Four deposits of cremated bone and one of charcoal mixed with pottery lay around the pit (this last was almost due north of the pit - marked by a cross on the plan). Slight differences in burial ritual were observed; for example on the north-west of the pit cremated bone lay on a small thick slab of granite whereas on the other sides of the pit cremated bone had been placed in shallow cavities scooped out of the subsoil but with no stones below or beside them.

8 The surface of the cairn and the area between the cairn and circle stones were pitted with six scoops which may have been spaces for burial deposits, although no definite evidence was found.

How do we know what we think we know?

When FR Coles of the National Museum excavated the Nine Stanes in 1904 he spent 12 days with some of the landowner's workmen clearing the undergrowth and turning over the loose stones. In making a plan of all visible features before work began, dividing the circle into sections, using a surveyor's level, and sieving the soil that was trowelled out of the central space he exercised more care than most of his fellow archaeologists of the time. However, he was not able to answer many questions such as the length of time between the building of the circle and the erection of ring cairn.

By comparing the Nine Stanes with similar sites which have been excavated more recently we can do something to fill this gap, but it demonstrates one of the drawbacks of excavation, namely that the evidence is destroyed as it is revealed. This is why modern excavators make such detailed records in the form of photographs, plans and descriptions. Today the full excavation of a stone circle would take considerably longer than 12 days and involve many scientific tests. However, we can be sure that archaeologists in 2080 will be regarding such work as just as limited as we do Fred Coles's. It is always better to conserve archaeological sites rather than excavate them.