The Bronze Age 2500 BC - 800 BC

The Bronze Age in North East Scotland was a time of great change, which saw the emergence of a new society hugely different from what had come before.

Around 2500 BC, different cultural ideas influenced by Northwestern Europe developed in North East Scotland. These ideas, sometimes attributed to the ‘Beaker People’, named for the distinctive type of pottery vessels found at burial sites, are culturally and technologically different from the previous Neolithic traditions. Most significantly, the period saw the introduction of metalworking skills.

The knowledge of how to produce copper and bronze objects set individuals apart from the rest of the population and saw the beginnings of a hierarchical society develop.

Settlement habits also changed during this time, with the roundhouse becoming the dominant dwelling form. These roundhouses had walls made of timber or stone, probably with thatched roofs, somewhat built singly or in small groups.

As well as technological innovations, new ritual and funerary monuments evolved. There was a move away from communal tombs to individual burials, along with the appearance of megalithic monuments such as standing stones and stone circles, including the distinctive Recumbent Stone Circle.

Selected Reading

A. WELFARE Great Crowns of Stone (2011) RCAHMS.

Stone Circles and Recumbent Stone Circles?

Stone circles can be found throughout Britain and Ireland, in various forms, and were erected during the third and second millennia BC (the Bronze Age). While the exact function of these enigmatic monuments is difficult to determine, the considerable labour required to build them would seem to suggest that they were of great importance to their prehistoric communities who created them.

Around 10% of the total number of stone circles recorded in Britain can be found in Aberdeenshire, and the region even boasts its own unique style of circle: the Recumbent Stone Circle.

Found almost exclusively in Aberdeenshire, more than 70 examples of Recumbent Stone Circles have been recorded in the region, with diameters ranging from 11 m to 28 m.

The distinctive feature of the Recumbent Stone Circle is a massive stone laid horizontally on its side in the Southwestern or Southern arc of the circle, flanked by the two tallest stones of the circle. The recumbent stones have an average weight of 24 tons, and were carefully levered and chocked up to ensure that their upper surface was as level as possible.

Recumbent Stone Circles are usually found on the crests of hills or terraces, with wide Southerly views, although in some cases the landscapes in which they now sit would be unrecognisable to their creators.

The beliefs or rituals connected with the stones can only be speculation. The function of Recumbent Stone Circles has generated a great deal of study and debate over the years. It is generally accepted, however, that the precise setting of the stones is linked to the cycles of the moon.

It is believed that the recumbent and flanking stones form a kind of false horizon or frame through which to see the rising or setting of the major standstill moon that occurs every 18.6 years. At that point, the moon dips towards the recumbent. On 12 Recumbent Stone Circles, decorations in the form of cupmarks have been found, clustering at points where the major standstill moon rises or sets (on the recumbent, flanking, or immediately adjacent stones).

In several cases, Recumbent Stone Circles were converted into burial monuments by the building of a ring cairn or kerb cairn within the stone circle into which cremation burials were placed. In this respect, Recumbent Stone Circles are closely related to the Early Bronze Age Clava Cairns of the inner Moray Firth and Speyside.

These ceremonial centres, built by the local farming communities, are so different from the previous communal burial tombs of their ancestors that it suggests a fundamental change in society. They also mark a strong regional tradition that is not found anywhere else and may belong to a distinct set of beliefs, completely separate from the ideas and values of others to the North and South.

Scheduled Monuments

Most of the sites listed here have been designated as Scheduled Monuments, monuments of national importance to which Scottish Ministers have given legal protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. It is a criminal offence to damage a Scheduled Monument. Historic sites should be treated with care and respect.

Aberdeenshire Council

www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology

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Produced by Aberdeenshire Council February 2022

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Respect the interests of others

Respect the needs of other people enjoying or working in the outdoors and follow any reasonable advice from land managers.

Care for the environment

Take your rubbish home and consider picking up other litter as well. Don’t disturb or damage wildlife or historic places. Keep your dog on a short lead or under close control where needed.

Take responsibility for your own actions

The outdoors is a great place to enjoy but it’s also a working environment and natural hazards exist. Make sure you are aware of this.

www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot

A guide to ten of the best Stone Circles in Aberdeenshire

What are Stone Circles and Recumbent Stone Circles?

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AIKEY BRAE

The stone immediately East of the East flanker has a weight 21.5 tons. and outer faces. Most of the stones of the circle are granite although the fallen stones, including the recumbent and flankers, and 5 fallen stones, including the recumbent, its West flanker and 2 other stones. Its almost perfectly circular plan places this circle early in the series of Recumbent Stone Circles. It is 19.5 m in diameter, comprising 9 erect stones, the red granite recumbent, 2 grey granite flankers plus 3 massive blocks which form a reserved area in front of the recumbent. The West flanker has 4 cupmarks, on it. The differences between this recumbent and its flankers and the other stone circles can be clearly seen in terms of their geological origins.

Directions: 1.4 miles (2.3 km) West of Altcar, Stone. West from the foot of Brougham Farm, Due south of Altcar, follow the Brougham Farm lane which meets the signposted path. From the car park follow the signposted path.

NINE STONES

Remains of a Recumbent Stone Circle, comprising 8 stones placed around the circumference of a circle circa 10 m in diameter. Within the stone circle, 3 small kerb cairns were added which when excavated contained burnt bone, charcoal, flint tools and pottery. The central cairn is the largest, at 3.4 m in diameter, and is the only one to have a double kerb. This stone circle is seen as a later development of the Recumbent Stone Circle tradition.

Directions: 0.1 miles (0.2 km) North of Aidensford, Take the A59 at Luntwood Church and graveyard. The 2 flankers, each 2.5 m high, have been matched and cupmarked. Kerb cairns: A circle of upright kerbstones, often quite large, containing a mound of small stones. Sometimes contain burials.

Ring cairn: Circular or oval banks of stones with an open area left clear in the centre to form a ring shape. Sometimes contain burials.

Kirkton of Durris, then turn right onto a minor road towards Woodlands of Durris for 0.9 miles (1.4 km), then continue on the road to the left for 0.5 miles (0.8 km). At the end of the road turn left into a car park. At the top of the car park the left side of the stone circle can be seen. Please do not block the narrow exit.

Whitehill

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, circa 20 m in diameter, within which is a well defined ring cairn of circa 17 m in diameter. Only the grey granite recumbent, its West flanker and 2 other stones are in their original positions, although a number of fallen stones remain.

Directions: 10.3 miles (16.6 km) South west of Aberlour, Take the A949 at Linnick, then continue on the road for 3.6 miles (5.8 km) to the A939. Turn right towards Ballindalloch and then continue on the road for 2 miles (3.2 km). Continue on the road for 0.5 miles (0.8 km) and then continue on the road to the left for 0.5 miles (0.8 km). At the end of the road turn left into a car park.

Cullen Hill

HER Ref No: NJ07500001 // NJ 7947 9545 // AB31 6DX

Recumbent Stone Circle, measuring 17.5 x 16.7 m, consisting of the recumbent, 2 flankers and 3 erect stones. All are of red granite. The recumbent is on the South side, measuring circa 3 m in length and weighing over 9 tons. The centre of the circle is occupied by a cairn measuring circa 15.3 x 13.9 m. Immediately to the East of the stone circle is a ring cairn.

Directions: 6.0 miles (9.7 km) East of Alford, From the A96, turn onto the A967 at Crathes, after crossing the River Don turn left on to the A939, continue on the road for 4.7 miles (7.5 km), after entering Buchan District of Scotland, then turn right onto Main Road towards Woodend of Don for 0.8 miles (1.3 km). Continue on the road to the left for 0.5 miles (0.8 km). Please do not block the narrow exit. From the car park the left side of the stone circle can be seen. Please do not block the narrow exit. Please do not block the narrow exit.

Stones Hill

HER Ref No: N16150002 // NJ 6432 1350 // AB57 7SS

Recumbent Stone Circle, circa 20 m in diameter, within which is a well defined ring cairn of circa 17 m in diameter. Only the grey granite recumbent, its West flanker and 2 other stones are in their original positions, although a number of fallen stones remain.

Directions: 3.5 miles (5.6 km) North west of Inverurie, Take the B9001 out of Inverurie, and after 4.3 miles (6.9 km) turn left towards the village of Kemnay, then continue for 0.2 miles (0.3 km) to a wide road junction. Take the right hand road towards Kemnay. Stone. From the car park follow the signposted path. From the car park follow the signposted path.

Tomhaverie

HER Ref No: NJ40550001 // NJ 4095 0594 // AB34 1YQ

Reconstructed Recumbent Stone Circle, circa 15 m in diameter. It comprises the massive whinstone recumbent, 2 flankers and 6 erect stones of pale red granite. The recumbent has 2 cupmarks. The circle enclosed a ring cairn, circa 14 m across, whose substantial kerb still survives.

Directions: 4.0 miles (6.4 km) North west of Aberdeen. Turn right at ANI onto B9001 at the entrance of Althorn. Continue on the road for 4 miles (6.4 km). The car park is on the left. From the car park follow the signposted path.