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Statement of Significance

Machrie Moor Stone Circles and Moss Farm Road Stone Circle



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Brief description

Machrie Moor in Arran is a rich archaeological landscape containing prehistoric ritual, funerary and domestic structures. The visible monuments include stone circles, standing stones, chambered cairns, hut-circles and field systems. Excavations have shown that earlier timber monuments underlie those visible on the surface. It is very likely that there are many other remains beneath and between the visible sites. Much of the area is scheduled.

The property in care comprises three parcels of land within this wider landscape. Area A, on Moss Farm Road, incorporates a so-called stone circle, actually a complex ring cairn with a substantial kerb. Area B, just south of Moss Farm, incorporates 'Suidhe Coire Fhionn' or 'Fingal's Cauldron Seat', two fine concentric rings of granite boulders. The largest area, Area C, encloses five stone circles of various types and in various states of preservation, including two with remarkably tall standing stones. Another circle, which would have had either timber or stone posts has recently been discovered through geophysical survey.

All but Circle 11 were partially excavated in the late 19th century. The burials then discovered included cremations and crouched inhumations. They were accompanied by a variety of grave goods such as food vessels, flint tools and pieces of worked pitchstone. Excavations in 1985-6 demonstrated that elaborate timber circles (erected around 2300 BC) preceded two of the stone circles by around 500 years. Although this phase of activity was followed by farming over the area, the subsequent stone circles were erected exactly on the old timber circle sites. Finds included pottery in a range of styles dating from the early 4th to the mid 2nd millennium BC and numerous small stone tools.

The group of six stone circles on Machrie Moor (Fingal's Cauldron Seat and the five circles in the main area) is one of the best-known archaeological sites on Arran. Visually striking, its importance is enhanced by the surviving scheduled ancient landscape around it, and the evidence that this site was chosen to allow good visibility of midsummer sunrise at a prominent notch in the eastern hills.

Character of the monument

Historical overview

There are various numbering schemes for the monuments in care. The archaeological literature refers to circles 1 to 5 and 11 (the other numbers referring to monuments outwith the area in care). The HES numbering is similar, except that circle 11 is numbered 6.

- 1832: Skene described numbers 1 to 5 of the stone circles
- 1858: the peat and vegetation cover at circle 5 was stripped by MacArthur. He excavated to a depth of approximately 1m without reaching the original soil surface.
- 1861-3: circles 1 to 5 were partially excavated by James Bryce, revealing a number of burial cists.
- 1864: a sixth stone circle was recorded by the Ordnance Survey NE of circle 1; it was subsequently numbered 11 (HES 6).
- 1962: Moss Farm cairn taken into care.
- 1963: Probing of peat by Roy et al to the north of circle 1 led to the rediscovery of circle 11 (HES 6).
- 1972: Machrie Moor Stone Circles taken into care.
- 1978-9: Aubrey Burl partially excavated the Moss Farm Road cairn. He revealed that this was an encircled cairn.
- 1985-6: Alison Haggarty excavated circles 1 and 11 (HES 6).
- 1997: watching briefs were carried out during minor works to align fences; no archaeological deposits were revealed.
- 2022: geophysical survey by Historic Environment Scotland identifies pit-like anomalies interpreted as a further prehistoric circle (Machrie 12)

Archaeological overview

Moss Farm Road ring cairn, in Area A, has been damaged by the farm road, and the much-robbled kerb now includes only seven large upright stones, up to 1.3 m in height, and five more now on edge. Small-scale excavations in 1978-9 showed that a low penannular cairn of heavy boulders had been surrounded by a 22 m diameter ring of upright slabs, outside which was a stony bank about 3 m across. It suggested that the small stones inside the ring had been dumped there in the 19th century.

Circle 1 and the nearby Circle 11 (HES 6), in Area C, are discussed together because they were included in a single excavation area in 1985-6 and had similar histories of use. Circle 1 is an elliptical setting of six granite boulders and five sandstone slabs. A gap twice the normal width and facing Circle 11 may be a formal entrance; had it contained a stone there would have been 12 roughly equally spaced stones in all. When Bryce trenched the centre of Circle 1 he recorded no archaeological remains. Excavations by Aubrey Burl in 1978-9 showed that Bryce had failed to recognise a large posthole. Circle 11 was discovered in 1864 by the Ordnance Survey, and subsequently relocated by probing through the peat. Alison Haggarty's excavations showed that it consists of 10 upright stones, up to 1m tall. Circle 11 may also have a gap, or gaps, in the north-west, not facing Circle 1.

Radiocarbon dates suggest that the earliest known activity, including the digging of a pair of pits and a gully at the site of circle 11, dates from roughly 3500 BC. Timber rings were erected at both sites, probably within a few hundred years either side of 2500 BC, and represent the first explicitly ritual activity there. That at Circle 1 was an elaborate double ring of posts enclosing a central arrangement of five timbers. Sherds of Grooved Ware were recovered from the post-holes during excavation. While having their own distinct character, they have stylistic elements found on pots from other ceremonial sites in Fife and burial sites in Orkney, as well as ceremonial sites in England. Circle 11 was a single ring of timbers. Both sites were superseded by an arrangement of post and stake holes between 2300 and 2000 BC and it is likely that these represent the laying out of fields. Around 2000BC, stone circles were erected on the sites of the timber circles. An enigmatic symbol is pecked on a

boulder inside Circle 11. After 2000BC, archaeological evidence shows evidence for cultivation around the site, perhaps linked to the round houses visible in the surrounding landscape.

Circle 2 is nearly 14 m in diameter. Three of an original seven or eight sandstone slabs, 4 to 5 m tall, survive, while others remain as stumps. One of two smaller slabs within the circle, perforated as if for a millstone, may reflect a reason why four or five stones were brought down, although their rock type is different from that of the upright standing stones. Bryce's excavations in 1861 revealed a central burial cist with a food vessel and flints, and an empty cist.

Circle 3 probably originally consisted of some 9 tall stones. The surviving upright is over 4 m tall. Three stumps are still visible, and their snapped-off upper parts remain under the peat. It has been claimed that the circle was egg-shaped but the evidence for this is open to question. Excavations by Bryce in 1861 revealed a central cist containing a pot (which disintegrated during excavation) and a few flints, and a cist containing a crouched burial and a few more flints.

Circle 4 consists of four granite boulders each under a metre tall enclosing an area about 6 m across. Excavations by Bryce revealed a central cist containing an inhumation, a food vessel, a bronze awl and three flints.

Circle 5, also known as 'Suidhe Coire Fhionn' or 'Fingal's Cauldron Seat' is in Area B, close to the main Area C. It consists of two fine rings of granite boulders. The inner circle of 8 granite boulders measures 12 m across. The outer circle is about 18 m in diameter and contains 15 stones. One of the smaller stones of this ring is perforated. The circle was partially excavated by McArthur in 1858. He removed many packing stones and small boulders. It may be that the small bank running between the stones of the inner circle reflects his activities, at least in part. Bryce conducted further excavations in 1861, revealing an empty, ruined cist at the centre. It is possible that one of the stones of the outer circle was moved to its present position after their excavations since both of them recorded only 14 stones there.

Circle 11 (HES 6) is discussed along with Circle 1 above.

Circle 12 was discovered through geophysical survey in 2022. Located 60m to the southeast of Machrie 3 it consists of 12 pit-like anomalies which form a circle with additional spacing for two more settings. Given that these are buried features with no stone present, the circle could have consisted of either timber or stone posts. However, the interpretation of this is currently tentative, and will need to be tested through excavation.¹

The archaeological evidence thus suggests that the stone circles were the focus for religious and ceremonial activities for at least 1500 years. Burials, both crouched inhumations within cists and cremations with a variety of grave goods were made within most of the circles, probably long after they were first built. The succession of timber circles, then farming activities, stone circles and then more farming activities before the sites were overwhelmed by peat was probably broadly similar to the succession of activities at other Scottish sites, in the sense that periods of building seem to have been followed by periods of disuse as ceremonial centres, followed by further periods of use.

The area in care has a further importance. Careful analysis of the wider area in which the circles sit shows that the latter seem to have been sited so that midsummer sunrise would have been visible in a prominent notch at the head of Machrie Glen. The same phenomenon is not so obvious in other parts of the moor. It is not suggested that precise astronomical observation was attempted on Machrie Moor in prehistory. Instead it seems very possible that celebrations, rituals and gatherings of people from the surrounding countryside took place at midsummer or thereabouts. The phenomenon provides one explanation why so many circles were built here and why the area was used for so long.

The stone circles comprise an important ceremonial complex in their own right, but are only one part of a wider archaeological landscape of ritual monuments such as standing stones, stone circles and burial cairns which lies adjacent to extensive settlement remains such as hut-circles and field-systems. The relative roles of

¹ For further information on this topic see [Machrie Moor, Geophysical Survey Report \(WP009134\) \(trove.scot\)](#)

climatic change, over-farming of the land and social changes in the eventual abandonment of the Machrie Moor area in favour of settlement above the valley floor has yet to be determined. The exceptionally good survival of archaeological remains in the landscape around the circles, and the remaining large archaeological potential of all but Circles 1 and 11, make Machrie Moor an internationally valuable resource. This has been further shown by the recent geophysical survey which has demonstrated that previously unknown archaeological remains are located across the landscape, beneath the peat.

Artistic/Architectural overview

Stone selection appears to have been a significant feature at Machrie Moor 1, where there are five sandstone slabs and six granite boulders set alternately. This juxtaposition of materials is not repeated at any of the other rings, which seem to be wholly composed of granite or sandstone, except perhaps Circle 2 where what seem to be snapped off standing stone fragments are of a different stone from the surviving uprights.

Circle 5, 'Fingal's Cauldron Seat', is the most complex arrangement of stones at Machrie, comprising a double ring of stones. The other circles are composed of a single ring of granite or sandstone monoliths, and are either elliptical or circular on plan.

Social overview

Although no academic studies have been carried out on modern attitudes towards these monuments, the stone circles are popular with those celebrating events such as the Summer Solstice. As described above, the Machrie stone circles are in general alignment with a notch on the skyline, a point where Machrie Glen divides into two, the sun apparently rises in this notch on Midsummer's morning. The stones are a popular feature for visitors to Arran, much in the way Calanais is for the Western Isles.

Each area of Scotland has its own distinctive types of site, and these regional variations reflect underlying differences in ancient beliefs, customs and traditions. However, about 5000 years ago there are hints of longer distance connections between major ceremonial sites through architectural similarities and the artefacts found at them. The relative similarities and differences between these ceremonial sites may be one important way of disentangling local and longer distance connections between people at that time. Equally it seems likely that during some periods most social connections were fairly local; long distance connections were at most indirect. The archaeological landscape at Machrie Moor, including the properties in care, has unusually high potential for addressing these and many other aspects of ancient societies.

Spiritual overview

Although the rituals and beliefs associated with the stone circles at Machrie remain unknown, the circles are part of a trend in constructing monumental ritual sites which spread throughout the British Isles in the Neolithic period.

Folk tradition associates circle 5, known as ‘Fingal’s Cauldron Seat’, with Fingal the giant (a mythic figure likely derived from the cycle of Irish tales about Fionn Mac Cumhail). According to the tradition, Fingal used the stone with the hole in it in the outer circle to tether his dog Bran while he ate a meal within the inner ring. Such traditions can offer an insight into how later communities regarded the world around them.

The Machrie circles feature prominently in several ‘New Age’ tour guides, and are popular with people interested in experiencing important astronomical events such as the summer solstice.

Aesthetic overview

The tall stones are very striking. The open moorland setting, with hills in the background, is an especially evocative backdrop. The site has a distinct sense of

being apart from the rest of the world. The immediate landscape contains a wealth of well-preserved archaeology.

The patterns of differential weathering on the sandstone monoliths are visually striking, as is the juxtaposition of sandstone and granite stones at circle 1.

Assessment of Significance

Key points

The stone circles of Machrie Moor are a well-known archaeological feature, and are prominent in many national guidebooks and websites.

Although the circles are visually impressive, they are part of a wider archaeological landscape that contains a wide variety of ritual sites and settlement remains.

The stone circles, and their timber predecessors, show that the inhabitants of Arran had contacts with the wider world as they engaged fully in the ritual practices found throughout late Neolithic Britain.

Associated properties

PIC: Ring of Brodgar; Stone of Stenness; Calanais; and to a lesser extent other stone circles in care. **Prehistoric Monuments in the Kilmartin Glen** Other monuments include Balfarg henge and adjacent 5000 year old sites.

Keywords

Timber circle; stone circle; monolith; cremation; inhumation; cist; hut circle; field-system; Grooved Ware; radiocarbon; Neolithic; Bronze Age; Fingal; Fionn MacCumhail; solstice