

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC234

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90088)

Taken into State care: 1930 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CULLERLIE STONE CIRCLE



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Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at www.historicenvironment.scot

CULLERLIE STONE CIRCLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The stone circle at Cullerlie sits on a gravel ridge at 90 m altitude in the valley bottom near Leuchar Moss and Loch of Skene, surrounded on all sides by rising ground. It includes a ring of eight monoliths around an area about 10 m in diameter which was used for cremation. Subsequently the area within the stone circle was filled with eight small rings, each containing a cremation.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Second millennium BC - Probable period of erection of the stone circle.

1820 - The surrounding ground was uncultivated and seven small rings could be seen in the circle, an eighth having been destroyed earlier. Nine similar small rings were to be seen a short distance to the south-west.

1900 - Eight stones named as 'Standing Stones of Echt' and mentioned in the farm lease as requiring protection. Four of the inner small rings were visible. At this time the site was regarded as being in the Moss of Leuchar.

1930 - Taken into care

1935 - Excavated by Kilbride-Jones

1999 - Rescheduled

Archaeological Overview

The stone circle at Cullerlie sits on a gravel ridge at 90 m altitude in the valley bottom near Leuchar Moss and Loch of Skene, north of the Dee, surrounded on all sides by rising ground. It includes a ring of eight monoliths around an area about 10m in diameter which was used for cremation. Subsequently the area within the stone circle was filled with eight small rings, each containing a cremation.

Around 1820 nine small rings similar to those inside the circle were to be seen a short distance to the south-west. There may also have been an outlying stone 3 or 4 m west of the circle.

The circle had clearly been disturbed before the 1935 excavation; one of the small rings inside it had been almost destroyed, and others had displaced stones and other signs of damage.

The circle consists of eight rather squat undressed stones ranging in height from just over 1m to about 1.8m, with the tallest to the north, placed round the circumference of a near-circle 10 to 11m in diameter. The interior had been

levelled prior to the erection of the stones, and subsequently piles of willow twigs were fired within the area, scorching the ground and leaving little piles of ash and burnt stone at the bases of the monoliths. Eight small ringed burial cairns were then built. Some of the stones inside these rings appeared to have been burnt. All but two of the small rings were surrounded by 11 kerb stones. The largest occupied the central position and had a double ring of kerbstones, 22 in all. It covered a pit containing large chunks of charcoal, and some cremated bone. The others sat in the space between this and the upright stones. Five of the rings yielded burnt human bones and charcoal. One scrap of pottery and three worked flints were found.

Small stone circles with some resemblances to Cullerlie are found sporadically in a few parts of Britain and northern Ireland. Their resemblances probably owe as much to the sharing of a broad common background set of beliefs as to widespread communication of specific ideas.

Phase 3 of Croft Moraig in Perthshire may be broadly similar to the stone circle at Cullerlie, albeit with slightly more and taller stones. Small internal ring cairns have been found at Temple Wood in Argyll where they are dated approximately to the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. While there is no evidence that the kerb cairns are of the same date as the ring, this may give some support to the idea that Cullerlie was built later than the recumbent stone circles of the area.

On the other hand, Cullerlie is in an area with very few recumbent stone circles. It was probably preserved during the agricultural improvements of the 19th century because its proprietor put a clause in his lease to tenants. It is conceivable that many other sites like it have been destroyed. Dalrymple, in 1884, describing his excavations at Broomend of Crichton (which included a circle about 12 m across of 6 rough monoliths not all that different in size from Cullerlie), refers to other small stone circles in the area and remarks that "The valleys of the Don and Urie, however, teemed with such remains, of which enough still exist richly to reward the explorer, although agriculture is too quickly bringing about their demolition.". It is also conceivable that other monuments like it were built of timber rather than stone. It may be best to regard it as a rare survival of what may once been a type of monument common in the lowlands of the north-east of Scotland.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

It is quite striking that the number of ring cairns within the circle is the same as the number of standing stones, and that all but one of the small rings inside had kerbs made up of 11 or 22 stones. The significance of this is unknown.

Social Overview

The original social significance of the monument is obscure. Presumably it was a local 'central place' round which revolved a network of social ties.

Little social significance seems to attach to the monument today. Nevertheless, in our age of globalisation, some sections of society attach a particular significance to stone circles and similar monuments and their associated landscapes. It may be that this tendency will increase as the rest of society becomes more uniform, reincarnating the importance of the monuments as markers of local identity.

Spiritual Overview

Clearly those who built the site were intrigued by numbers. There are 8 stones and 8 cairns, and 11 or 22 kerb stones for all but one of the little rings. Although the significance of this is opaque it does suggest a culture in which the supernatural had numerical overtones.

Aesthetic Overview

This small but unusually neatly-formed site sits primly in a fairly flat landscape with rising land on all sides. It opens up the mind to what else there was in this bowl of land several thousand years ago.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

There is no scientific dating for the site.

It is unclear why it is sited in a valley bottom (albeit on a gravel ridge) when most of the stone circles of north-east Scotland were sited in upland locations.

It is not clear whether Cullerlie is a rare survivor of a once common type or a monument unusual in the north-east of Scotland and, more widely, Britain and northern Ireland.

The significance of the repetition of the numbers of kerb stones in the small rings is unknown.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

Rarity
Repetition of numbers
Lowland situation

Associated Properties

Temple Wood, Broomend of Crichtie, Croft Moraig.

Keywords stone circle, cremation