

## 5. Megaliths on Arran - Maths, Myths and Mysteries

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### Abstract

The prehistoric archaeology of the islands of Malta and Arran is entirely different. That on Malta is characteristic of an "island culture" with unique styles of architecture unaffected by outside influences. Arran, despite the splendour of its megaliths, lacks such individuality. Its monuments are those of external culture.

The explanation is simple. Malta is an isolated island fifty miles from Sicily and with no attractive local products to encourage trade. Arran is closely surrounded to north, west and east by the Scottish mainland, and lies at the intersection of several important routes.

Its earliest megalithic sites are chambered tombs of the Clyde-Solway tradition with crescentic forecourts and segmented chambers. One, Monamore, excavated by Dr Euan MacKie in 1961, yielded calibrated dates ranging from 3900 to 2900 BC.

In Great Britain most regional groups of tombs display an interest in particular orientations. The entrances of many Clyde-Solway tombs are generally aligned to the north east, perhaps toward the mid summer sunrise, and on Arran on the remote cairn of Carn Ban is almost perfectly directed towards this solar event. Other Arran tombs, however, do not share this orientation, demonstrating some fragmentation of beliefs.

Carmahome, near Blackwaterfoot, is an oddity on Arran, a circular tomb of the Inverness-shire Clava passage-grave tradition, suggesting Middle or Late Neolithic contacts between Arran and the northern end of the Great Glen.

The stone circles on Arran also share architectural traits with mainland regions. Whereas most megalithic districts in Britain contain unique forms of stone rings those on Arran are reflections of circles in other areas. Perhaps dating from around 2500 BC the complex on Machrie Moor contains impressive 8-stone rings that are mostly comfortably compared with 8 -, 6 - and 4 – stone circles of central Scotland. Excavations by Bryce in 1861 recovered food-vessels from eccentrically-placed internal cists but these may not have been contemporary with the erection of the surrounding stones.

Circle V, a concentric ring for which there are counterparts in Northern Ireland, reveals how folk-stories can become distorted. Today it is said that a holed stone in the ring was used by the Celtic hero, Fhinn Mac-Coull, to tie his dog, Bran to. In 1700 Martin Martin recorded that natives believed that the dog was tethered to the one surviving stone or Circle II some distance away.

There is a possibility that Alexander Thom's "Megalithic Yard" a unit of measurement 2. 72" (0. 93m) long, was used in the laying-out of the Machrie Moor.

In 1978 and 1979 the speaker was invited by the Scottish Development Department to investigate by excavation what damage was being inflicted on the rings by cattle. Circles I and II were examined.

Circle 1 was an ellipse of six large granite boulders and five smaller sandstone blocks alternating round an oval 48 feet 3ins by 42 ft, lengths very close to 17 3/4 and 15 1/2 Megalithic Yards. A survey in the early 1960s by Dr Archibald Roy concluded that the ellipse had been set out from two foci. Meticulous inspection of their hypothetical positions failed to detect any sign of these markers.

Astronomically the ring was interesting. The long axis was approximately in line with the minor southern moonrise but the short axis was almost exactly aligned on the major northern moonrise. Field-analysis by John Barnatt concluded the entire circle complex had been located in a position from which the midsummer sun would have been seen rising in the north-eastern pass of The String between the hills.

Circle XI was a newly-discovered 'circle' of low stones close to Circle 1. Continual bad weather prevented the excavation being finished. The ring was not circular but irregular with a best fit diameter of 40ft 8ins, close to 15 Megalithic Yards. It had been preceded by a timber circle of rather larger dimensions. In 1980 the speaker was unable to continue with the work but succeeding seasons by Alison Haggarty recovered grooved ware and other artefacts of the late Neolithic/Early Bronze age horizon.

Influences from the recumbent stone circle tradition of north-eastern Scotland can be seen on Arran at Auchagallon circle to the west of Machrie Moor. Even later developments of diminutive 'Four Poster' rings exist at Aucheleffan and other sites. The greatest concentration of such late rings is in Perthshire, once again attesting to the importance of Arran as an intermediate staging-post in prehistoric Britain.

The erection of megaliths dwindled and disappeared by the late Bronze Age. Pairs of standing stones such as those near Brodick, counterparts of others in central Scotland, may have been set up as late as 1200 BC. These impressive sandstone pillars are probably the final manifestations of a tradition that had endured for nearly 3000 years.