

An unrecorded stone circle in North Tipperary

By Jean Farrelly and Caimin O'Brien

This site was identified and brought to the attention of the Office of Public Works by Paddy O'Donovan during a preliminary survey of the area prior to afforestation. The site consists of a circle of low orthostats situated on a natural rise of ground OD 700-800 ft. in a long narrow valley immediately east of Coum Hill in the Arra Mountains (Fig. 1). It is 8 miles SW of Nenagh and 3 miles S of Portroe.

A raised bog covers the valley floor. However, cartographic evidence reveals that between 1840 and 1902 a strip of bog was cut away. This process revealed the hitherto unrecorded monument. According to local information, the circle was robbed of some of its stones for the construction of nearby field walls.

Six surviving low upright stones on average 0.7m high define a small circular area measuring 8m in diameter (Fig. 2). These stones are set into the inner face of a low earth and stone bank, with a tentative entrance gap in the south-west quadrant. A collapsed standing stone, 0.8m high by 0.6m thick by 0.4m broad, lies 60m south-west of the site. There is evidence for packing stones at the base of this monolith. The arrangement of stone circle with outlying monolith can be compared with other sites as far south as Drombohilly Upper in Co. Kerry, and as far north as Beltany Tops in Co. Donegal.

The stone circle at Coumroe is only one of two stone circles which have been identified in Co. Tipperary, the other being located in a prominent position on Keeper Hill at Bauraghlanna in the Silvermines mountains. The Coumroe circle consists of eleven orthostats, the majority of which are less than 1m high, although the largest is 2m. It has been suggested that this circle is associated with local copper deposits (O Nualláin 1995, 20). The Tipperary examples lie within the western distribution of stone circles.

The distribution of stone circles has been traditionally divided into four regions: Cork-Kerry, Ulster, Eastern and Western. The main concentration of this monument type is found in the Cork-Kerry and Ulster series, with mainly isolated examples scattered throughout the Eastern and Western regions. The Cork-Kerry series are characterised by an uneven number of spaced orthostats, which decrease in height from the tallest entrance stones to the lowest recumbent stone opposite the entrance. There are, however, some interesting variations, including examples with either internal or external fosse and an example at Reanascreena South, Co. Cork which has an enclosing fosse and outer bank.

The great majority of these circles have their entrances orientated to the north-east. By contrast, the circles in the Ulster series are defined by low orthostats rarely exceeding a height of 1m and associated with long radiating stone rows up to 30m or more in length (O Nualláin 1984, 91). In the rest of the country many of the circles are characterised by the presence of an enclosing bank, into the inner face of which the circle is set. These embanked circles are widely dispersed, including examples as far apart as Boleycarrigeen, Co. Wicklow, Slatt Lower, Co. Laois and Nymphsfield, Co. Mayo.

Fig. 1 - Photograph of stone alignment in Arra Mountains



Fig. 1 – *Photograph of Coumroe Stone Circle.*



Fig. 4 – *Photograph of stone alignment in Barbaha townland.*

Dating and Function

There are indications that stone circles have their origins in the Neolithic period. Classic Neolithic pottery type, Carrowkeel Ware, was found in the interior of the stone circle at Millin Bay, Co. Down and in a cist within a central cairn at the stone circle at Ballynoe, Co. Down (O'Kelly 1989, 142-3). Small central cairns mounds are found associated with or within circles. Recent field work in Co. Cavan has revealed a possible passage tomb which is enclosed by a stone circle (O'Donovan 1995, 13). This may be paralleled with the passage tomb and surrounding stone circle at Newgrange, Co. Meath. The circle has been attributed to later Beaker activity around the site, dated to the Bronze age.

The excavation at the embanked stone circle at Grange, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick produced pottery and artefact evidence for a Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date (O'Kelly 1989, 138-9). Radiocarbon dates from Beaghmore, Co. Tyrone, Cashelkeelty, Co. Kerry and Drombeg, Co. Cork indicate that stone circles were erected in the Early to Middle Bronze Age (Burl 1994, 20; O Nualláin 1995, 43).

O Nualláin has drawn attention to the strong relationship which exists between stone circles and standing stones, stone pairs, stone rows, boulder-burials and cairns mounds (Fig. 3). The Coumroe example is found associated with a collapsed standing stone as mentioned above, and is overlooked by a stone pair in Burgesbeg townland 800m to the south-south-west and a stone alignment in Barbaha townland 600m to the east-south-east (see Fig. 4). All these monuments are traditionally associated with the Bronze Age and would suggest that there was a concentration of activity in this valley during this period.

In the Cork-Kerry series the distribution of stone circles appears to be closely linked with copper-rich areas, which were exploited by the metalworking people of the Bronze Age. Deposits of copper are also found on the edge of the Arra mountains, in Derry Castle, approximately two miles west of Coumroe (Anon. 1861, 42). This may have been a factor when choosing to settle this area in the Bronze Age.

Although very few of the stone circles in the country have been excavated, there can be little doubt that these are a ritual monument, constructed within a sepulchral tradition. Burials contained in a central pit were found at Bohonagh, Co. Cork, Cashelkeelty, Co. Kerry and Drombeg, Co. Cork, the latter being a cremated young adolescent contained within a coarse, flat-bottomed vessel (O Nualláin, 1995, 43).

A small central pit at Reanascreena South contained no burial evidence. However, slight traces of bone were found in a second pit towards the perimeter of the circle (O Nualláin, 1984, 9). The close association between boulder burials and stone circles in the Cork-Kerry series and between stone circles and cairns further underlines that these circles played an important role within a funerary context.

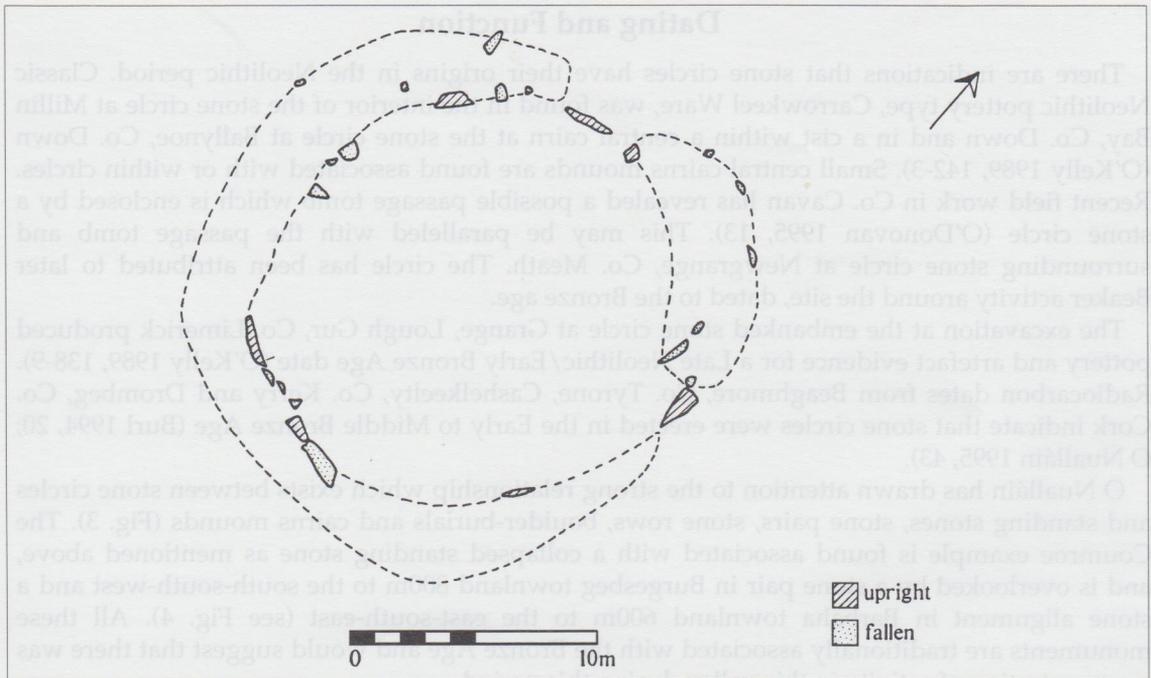


Fig. 2 – Plan of Coumroe Embanked Stone Circle.

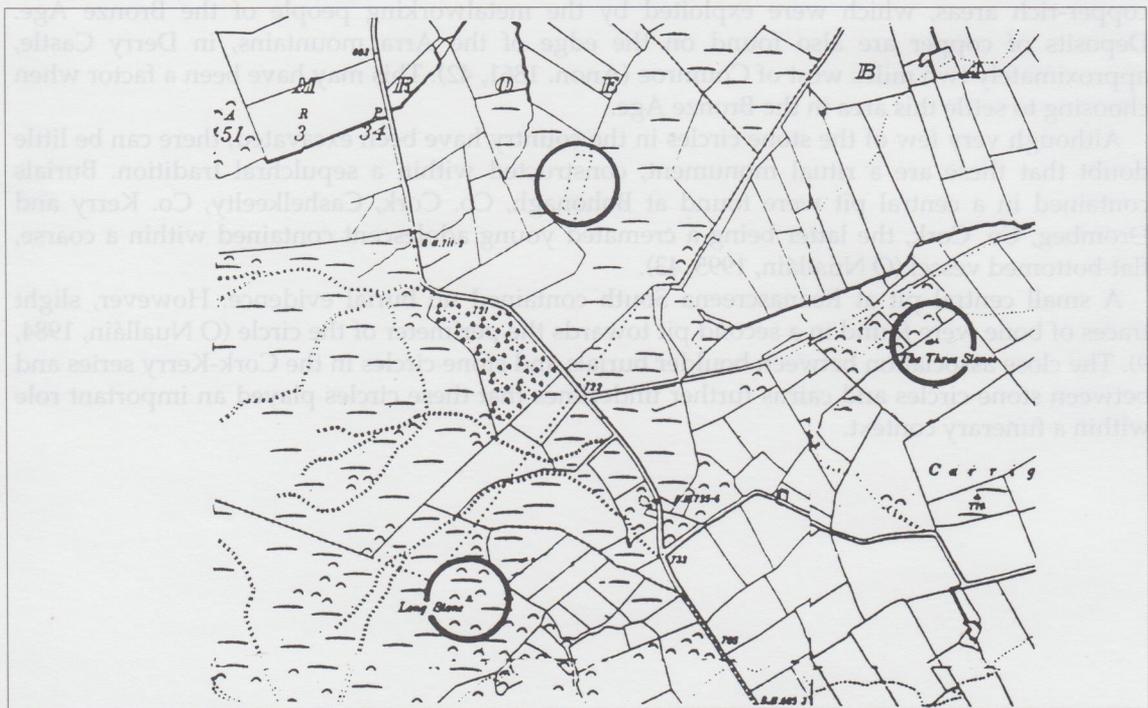


Fig. 3 – Map showing relationship between Coumroe Circle, Stone Pair (Long Stone) and Stone Alignment (The Three Stones), based on the Ordnance Survey, by permission of the Government (Permit No. 6625).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Sincere thanks are due to Aubrey Flegg of the Geological Survey of Ireland, for information on the mineralogy of the area.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anon.: *Memoirs of the Geological Survey* (Dublin, 1861).
Burl, Aubrey: *Prehistoric Stone Circles* (Buckinghamshire, 1994).
O Nualláin, Sean: "A survey of stone circles in Cork and Kerry", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. 88C (1984), 1-77.
O Nualláin, Sean: *Stone Circles in Ireland* (Dublin, 1995).
O'Kelly, Michael J.: *Early Ireland* (Cambridge, 1989).
O'Donovan, Patrick: *Archaeological Inventory of County Cavan* (Dublin, 1955).