

# SACRED STONES

Bronze Age people in Cork held strong religious beliefs, represented today by different types of ritual monument. Many of these are funerary sites that reflect deeply held beliefs in an after-life. Those burial places were a vivid reminder to Bronze Age people of their own mortality, at a time when average life expectancy was only 40 years or so. Many funerary customs can be recognized from the Bronze Age, with different regional traditions emerging over this long period. Common to these traditions were certain core beliefs, such as the existence of an Otherworld and supernatural powers that controlled the fate of the living.



The multiple-stone circle at Drombeg, near Rosscarbery, Co. Cork is one of Ireland's best-known archaeological sites. The circle measures some 9m in diameter and originally comprised 17 stones. It was excavated and subsequently reinstated by a team from University College Cork in 1957 who uncovered a number of pits, some pottery, flint and cremated human bone. An adjacent *fulacht fia* (considered to be an ancient cooking site) and hut-site were also excavated. Dates obtained during the investigations suggest the site dates to the later Bronze Age (c.1000 BC). The photograph is looking through the entrance or portal stones to the 'axial' stone on the southwestern perimeter.

The stone circle is the best known of these monuments, with some 100 examples recorded in Cork. The majority occur in the upper basin of the River Lee, and the coastal region of West Cork. There are two types: those with five stones and 'multiple-stone circles' with up to 17 stones. A distinctive feature is the presence of a low stone on the west/south-west side of the circle, often directly opposite two tall portal stones marking an entrance. The consistent alignment of portal stones to the axial stone was a religious imperative, aligning these circles on the setting sun in the darker months of the year.



Gold disc found by workmen in a quarry near Ballydehob, south of Ballycommane



This Bronze Age ritual complex south of Kealkill village, Co. Cork commands extensive views over the surrounding landscape and contains a five-stone circle, standing stone pair and radial stone cairn.

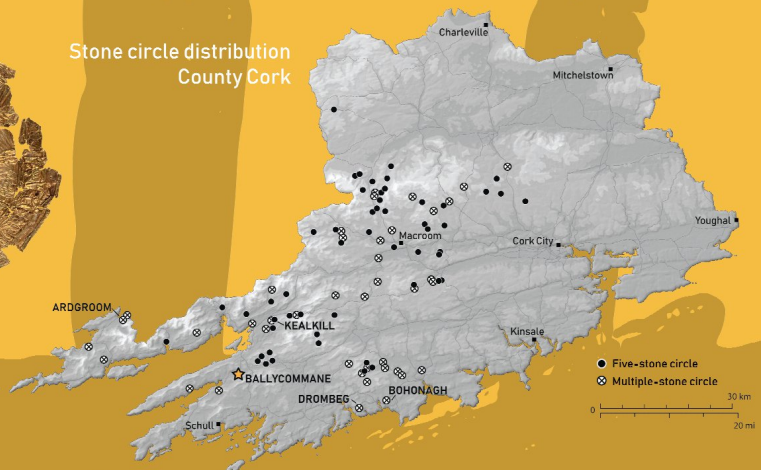
The Bronze Age (2500–700BC) was an important period of Irish prehistory, best known for production of sophisticated objects of copper, bronze and gold. Some of this metal came from copper mines in West Cork, including those on Mount Gabriel near Schull in the Mizen Peninsula. There was significant population growth in that period, with an expansion of farming settlement across many parts of Ireland. This was mostly a time of economic prosperity, with extensive trade contacts with Britain and the Continent. There was also strong regional identity, leading on occasion to outbreaks of warfare involving warrior elites connected after 1400BC to large political centres called hillforts.



A recent sunrise illuminates the standing stone pair and white quartz boulder-burial at Ballycommane (photograph by Andreas Stieglitz).

The centuries after 1500 BC saw a great expansion of agricultural settlement across the Cork and Kerry region. This is indicated by many thousands of *fulachtaí fia* cooking sites from that period. It is also reflected in new types of ritual monument built with free-standing upright stones. Known as the 'stone circle complex', these include two types of axial stone circle, as well as short stone rows, stone pairs, single monoliths, boulder-burials and radial stone cairns. These small, but impressive, stone monuments were built in large numbers by local communities across West Cork during the Middle to Late Bronze Age transition (1400–1000 BC). They occur in isolation or grouped together in different combinations, with a common alignment towards the horizon of the setting sun. These 'ancient stones' represent different physical expressions of a great religious cult of sun worship, which was based on a particular cosmological understanding of the world.

Stone circle distribution  
County Cork



Worship of the sun was an enduring element of religious belief in the prehistoric period. These people had different rituals to celebrate solar events such as the solstices and equinoxes, a marking of the seasons that held special significance in a farming economy. The principal deity was a Sun-God, a forerunner of the great Dagda of later Celtic mythology, whose worship was based on new monument types with solar symbolism. To a Bronze Age person these stone circle complex monuments were portals to an Otherworld existence. Each monument was a sacred place for a local community, and a symbol of their collective belief in a higher power. The burial of human remains at these sacred stones played an important role in this invocation of Otherworldly powers. The practice of cremation and the special significance of white quartz at these locations was a symbolic affirmation of life and renewal.



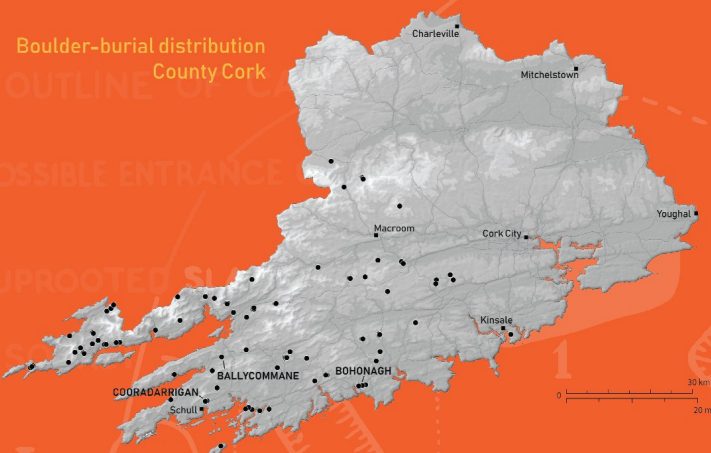
# BOULDER BURIALS

Section W/E

Boulder-burials are a unique element of the Bronze Age 'stone circle complex' in south-west Ireland. They are mostly found in Co. Cork where some 72 examples are recorded in a largely coastal distribution extending south from Kenmare Bay around the coast to Clonakilty Bay. They generally occur in isolation, though some sites have between two and four examples in close proximity. Boulder-burials also occur close to other monuments of the 'stone circle complex', with examples found inside twelve multiple-stone circles in the Bantry/Kenmare region. They are also found close to stone rows and pairs, as seen here at Ballycommane.

## COORADARRIGAN

These are two adjacent boulder-burials on the southern side of Mount Gabriel, 10km south of Ballycommane. The site was excavated in 1988 by University College Cork. The larger of the two monuments has a rounded boulder, 1.82m by 1.58m by 1.24m high, weighing some six tonnes. Like the Ballycommane example, it is also of white quartz. This boulder rests on a U-shaped arrangement of three smaller stones that opens to a low outlying stone on the north side. Excavation revealed a small pit with charcoal beneath the boulder. A radiocarbon date of 1425–1266 BC for that charcoal provides a Middle Bronze Age date for the monument.



The boulder-burial at Bohonagh, near Rosscarbery, Co. Cork. The adjacent multiple-stone circle originally comprised 13 stones, with nine surviving today.



The boulder-burial and standing stone pair at Ballycommane, viewed from the south (photograph by Andreas Stieglitz)

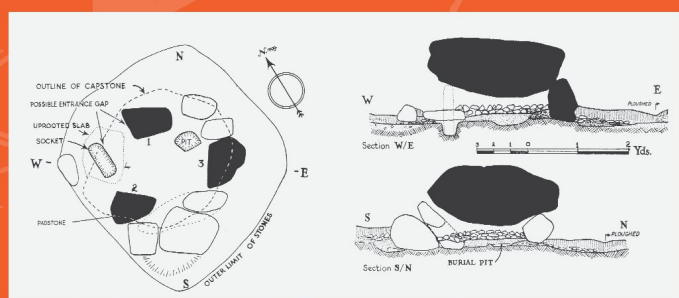
Boulder-burials generally consist of a rough stone boulder, usually a rounded glacial erratic, placed on three or more low stones. Small pad-stones are occasionally wedged between the boulder and support stones, to give the monument a level appearance. These impressive structures were never covered by a mound. Dating evidence from two examples in Cork (Cooradarrigan near Schull and Bohonagh near Rosscarbery) places them in the Middle to Late Bronze Age c.1400–1100 BC. Boulder-burials are so-called because they are believed to represent monumental markers erected above burials. This is based solely on the discovery of cremated human bone in the Bohonagh example.



Post-excavation photograph of the boulder-burial at Cooradarrigan, excavated by University College Cork in 1988.

## BOHONAGH

This boulder-burial is located 20m east of a well-known stone circle near Rosscarbery, Co. Cork. Both monuments were excavated in 1959 by University College Cork. The boulder-burial has a large rounded glacial erratic resting on three smaller boulders, two of which are of white quartz. There are small cupmarks on the surface of the boulder. An opening on the north-west side was originally marked by a low upright stone. Excavation revealed a shallow pit containing cremated human bone beneath the boulder. This bone is radiocarbon dated 1259–1024 BC, which compares well to a date of 1371–1055 BC for a cremation in the adjacent stone circle.



Plan and profile drawings of the boulder-burial at Bohonagh, recorded during excavations in 1959 by University College Cork.



# STONE ROWS

These are rows of two to six upright stones, generally aligned in a north-east/south-west direction. Some 145 examples are recorded in Cork, half of which are stone pairs. These mostly occur in the hills flanking the upper reaches of the river Lee, in the hinterland east of Bantry Bay, and in the coastal margins and valleys of the Beara Peninsula. Stone pairs generally occur in isolation, though they are also adjacent to five-stone circles, boulder-burials (as at Ballycommane) and single standing stones. This, together with their similar solar alignments, points to a close ritual connection between these monument types.



This standing stone pair near Ardroom, Co. Cork is just one of a significant number of Bronze Age monuments in this area, including *fulachtai fia*, boulder-burials, single and paired standing stones, settlement enclosures and an extensive spread of prehistoric field walls now buried beneath blanket peat. The well-known Ardroom stone circle is located some 700m to the northeast, and the Barrees stone pair (below) 4km to the southwest. The larger stone, measuring 3.5m in length, has collapsed. Its counterpart remains earthfast and is supported by a number of stones, one of which is a large quartzite boulder (visible in the photograph). The distinctive conical cap of Bunskeel hill, which overlooks Glenbeg lake to the south, is conspicuous in the distance.

## CLOGAGH

This stone pair near Timoleague was excavated in 2013 by University College Cork. Both stones had been removed during field clearance in modern times. Excavation located the original sockets, as well as three adjacent pits containing cremated human remains. Two of these pits each held the burnt remains of one adult individual, while a third pit contained those of an adult and a younger person. Radiocarbon dating of these cremations places the primary use of this stone pair in the Late Bronze Age, sometime between 1269-979 BC and contemporary with the Barrees monument.

## BARREES

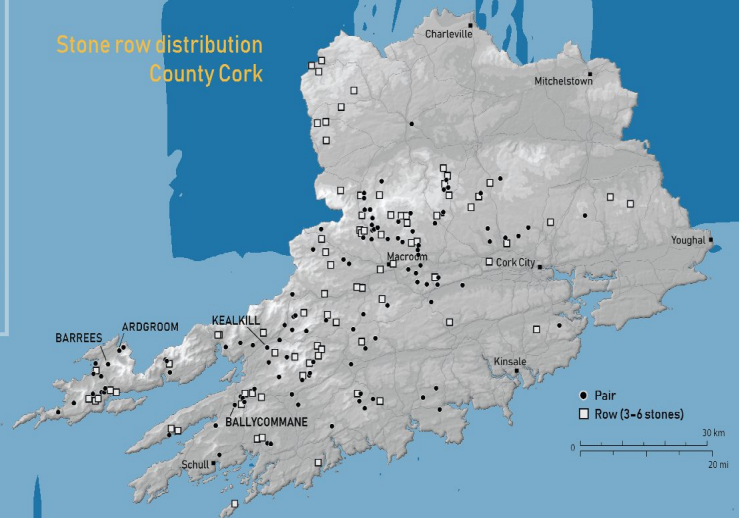
This stone pair is located in the Barrees valley, east of Eyeries village on the Beara Peninsula. The site was excavated in 2003 by University College Cork. The stones are 1.15m in height, and



The stone row at Maughanasilly, near Kealkill, Co. Cork, was excavated in 1979 by University College Cork. A flint scraper was the only find from the site and there was no secure dating evidence recovered. However, a radiocarbon date taken from peat immediately overlying the monument indicates the site was built before c.1365 BC. While this does not date the monument precisely, it does indicate that the site dates to at least the Middle Bronze Age.

Stone pairs in Cork are 1.9-5.2m in length, with individual stones between 0.7-3.6m in height. The larger stone rows can range 2.7-13.4m in length, with stones often up to 3m in height. Both types were used for funerary ritual, as indicated by the discovery in excavated examples of small pits with cremated human bone. Radiocarbon dating of a small number of stone rows and pairs indicates a broad date of 1400-1000 BC for their construction. This is supported by their close association with stone circles, cairns and boulder-burials, monuments of similar date with a related funerary and commemorative purpose.

### Stone row distribution County Cork



Local school children look on as student archaeologists from University College Cork carefully excavate the site at Clogagh in order to locate the stones' original sockets.



The project at Clogagh was truly a community effort, with a local construction company offering mechanical assistance to help reinstate the stones.





# ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT BALLYCOMMANE



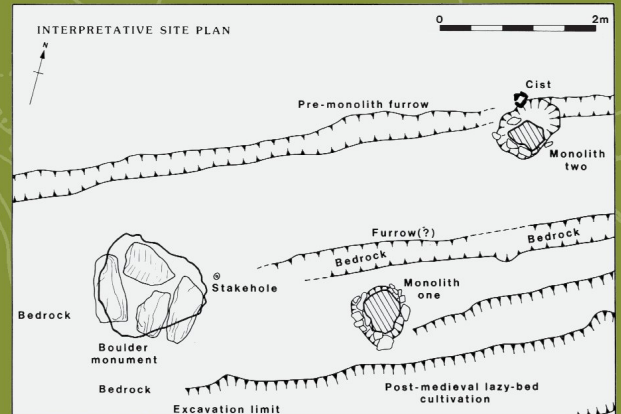
This Ordnance Survey 25-inch (1:2500) map depicts the area around Ballycommane in the early 1900's. The site is sketched and noted as a 'Cromlech' – a term often used by contemporary map-makers to denote monuments constructed using large stones, usually megalithic tombs (from the Greek *mégas* = 'great' and *lithos* = 'stone'). The map also shows a fording point (with 'stepping stones') on the Durrus River to the north. Crossing locations such as these will have been focal points in the prehistoric landscape and likely held significance for the Bronze Age monument builders at Ballycommane.

The **BOULDER-BURIAL** at Ballycommane is a typical example of this monument type and is accompanied here by a pair of standing stones. These small monuments are prominently placed on a low ridge in the centre of a valley that extends west to Dunmanus Bay. The site was excavated in 1989 by University College Cork. The boulder-burial comprises a large glacial erratic of white quartz, supported by three smaller stones to a height of 1.33m. The boulder is sub-triangular, measuring 1.86m by 1.66m by 1.02m high, and weighing 5-6 tonnes. It rests on a U-shaped arrangement of three small boulders, in the centre of which there is a single flat slab. That stone covered a small deposit of black silt, but no artifacts, human remains or charcoal were found. While the monument itself is not dated, it belongs to the Middle to Late Bronze Age (1500-1000 BC), based on comparisons with radiocarbon dated examples at Cooradarrigan and Bohonagh in Co. Cork.

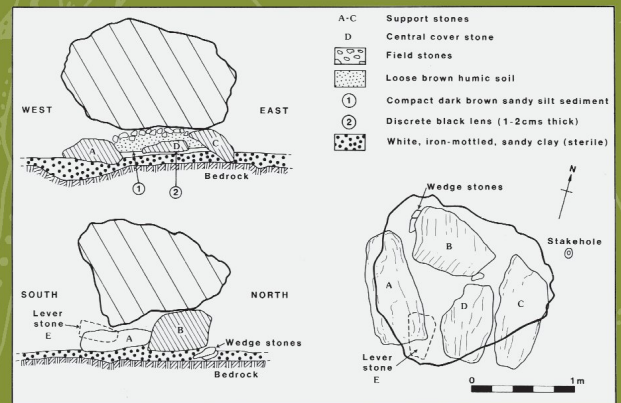
The excavation also investigated a pair of **STANDING STONES** located a few metres east of the boulder-burial. These are flat-topped monoliths, each around 1.3m in height, arranged 3.05m apart in a north north-east/south south-west alignment. They were set upright in shallow sockets dug into the mineral soil and secured with packing stones. Excavation at the base of the northern stone exposed a tiny stone-lined pit, measuring 0.25m by 0.24m by 0.13m deep. This so-called 'cist' contained black silt at the base, but no artifacts, human remains or dating evidence. Excavation revealed the socket for this stone had been dug through an earlier furrow that crossed this ridge in an east-west direction. This, and a second example 1.3m to the south, are ancient plough furrows connected with farming at this location some time before the stone pair was erected.



Ballycommane boulder-burial at different stages of the excavation process (clockwise from top-left)



Interpretative plan of the site at Ballycommane following excavation.



Plan and profile drawings of the boulder-burial at Ballycommane.



An excavation photograph of the southern stone and the boulder-burial at Ballycommane. The U-shaped arrangement of smaller 'pad' or support stones is visible beneath the quartz boulder.



A photograph showing the northern standing stone at Ballycommane during excavation. Part of the original socket has been excavated and the stone-lined 'cist' is visible to the right. The earlier furrow, into which the socket was dug, is also visible running diagonally across the photograph (approximately east-west).