Stone Circles and their Legends

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This blog introduces the importance of prehistoric stone circles, with a focus on the West Penwith area of Cornwall. It shall look at the legend of the Merry Maidens stone circle, and how a similar legend is told about the Nine Ladies Stone Circle, in the Peak District National Park, and one of the case studies in my PhD research. I will also look at how stone circles are still relevant to us as a society today and why they hold a great deal of interest to many people.

Stone Circles

There are over 1000 stone circles in Britain and Ireland, and as there are no written records from the time when they were constructed, there is little evidence as to how they were built and their purpose. There is a general agreement that these stone circles were places for ceremony and ritual, linked to the crossover between the worlds of the living and the dead, whilst some suggest that they may have also functioned as territorial markers. Construction and style vary within different areas due to adaptation by the local group of people (Cornish Ancient Sites Protection Network , Nine Ladies, English Heritage.).

Stone-Circles.org is a useful website for locating stone circles and other ancient monuments and being able to place them within the context of the wider landscape.

Stone Circles Within the Landscape

Stone Circles were not just isolated monuments, they formed part of a wider prehistoric landscape in the whole of the UK. This section will briefly introduce monumental landscapes before moving on to the West Penwith area.

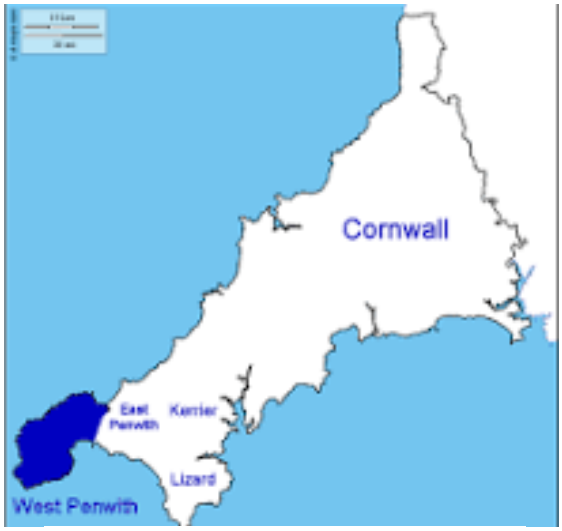
Stone Circles are often found in areas that are very remote and their origins are shrouded in mystery, with scholars believing they held several functions for people in the past, including: a place for holding ceremonies, observing astronomical events such as equinoxes and solstices, and other religious functions. The precise arrangement of the stones within the circle shows how past societies had a good understanding of engineering and geometry.

Prehistoric stone circles are enigmatic remnants of ancient civilisations that appear throughout the landscape with their enduring presence. These megalithic structures, dating back thousands of years, are often found in remote and mystical locations, evoking a sense of wonder and curiosity about their origins and purpose. Scholars believe these stone circles served various functions, from ceremonial and religious sites to astronomical observatories, aligning with celestial events such as solstices and equinoxes.

Stone Circles of the West Penwith Area

There are hundreds of stone circles throughout Cornwall, too many to do justice to here, so I shall focus on the West Penwith area. The stone circles of West Penwith, Cornwall, are captivating relics of ancient human activity, steeped in mystery and historical intrigue. These prehistoric monuments, such as the iconic Merry Maidens and the enigmatic Boskednan circle, stand as testament to the region's rich cultural heritage. Believed to date from the late Neolithic, each stone circle has several related sites surrounding it within the landscape.

The rugged landscape of West Penwith, with its rolling moors and dramatic coastline, provides a striking backdrop for these ancient structures, enhancing their mystical allure. Walking among these stones, one can't help but ponder the lives and beliefs of the people who constructed them thousands of years ago, making West Penwith a fascinating destination for history enthusiasts and casual visitors alike.



Map of West Penwith

There are five visible stone circles in the West Penwith area:

- The Nine Maidens
- Tregurnow
- The Merry Maidens
- Tregeseal
- Boscawen-ûn

These stone circles all vary in size and location and have a variety of other related sites including barrows, stones and menhirs in an area of around a mile. These complexes formed part of a living landscape, with all monuments forming an integral part of it, and no one should be seen in isolation. More information can be found at Ancient Penwith.

Legends and Stories of the Stone Circles

There are a variety of stories related to stone circles throughout the country, some of which have similar themes, highlighted here by the story of the Merry Maidens near Penzance, Cornwall, and a similar story about the Nine Ladies near Bakewell, in the Derbyshire part of the Peak District.

Merry Maidens, Cornwall

The Merry Maidens stone circle is described by the Cornish Ancient Sites Protection Network as late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (about 2500-1500 BC). It is located about 4 miles (6km) from Penzance, on the road to St Buryan, in a landscape filled with natural features, alignments and several important prehistoric sites. Some of these sites include: Carn Brea, Gear Round, St Michael's Mount and Treryn Dinas. This links Bronze Age sites to the older Neolithic ones, providing a sense of connection to the past.

Photo of the Merry Maidens - Ancient Penwith

The Merry Maidens is one of the few stone circles that are exactly circular and measures 24m in diameter. It was first recorded in the 18th century and is formed of 19 stones, ranging from 0.9m-1.4m in height.

The Cornish name for the Merry Maidens circle is 'Dawns Meyn' (dance of stones) and its name, as is the case with many monuments, comes from folklore. The legend of the circle is that nineteen maidens were at a wedding party on the eve of the Sabbath. Two pipers were playing music and the maidens were dancing to their tunes, as the party went on, and Sunday dawned, they were all turned to stone for their disrespect to the Sabbath. The Pipers were also turned to stone and are located in a nearby field as two standing stones.

Nine Ladies, Derbyshire

Stanton Moor, near Bakewell in the Peak District is home to a rare, highly important Bronze Age cairn field, which contains four embanked stone circles and more than 70 cairns. It was classified as an ancient scheduled monument in 1995. It is also unusual as it is home to several multi-phased industrial quarries of archaeological importance. Nine Ladies is the most well-known of the monuments on Stanton Moor and was first recorded in 1782 by Major Hayman Rook. There are ten stones within the 10.5x11.5m circle (a 10th was found in 1977), surrounded by a ditch. The King Stone lies 40 metres west-south-west of the circle (Blease-Bourne 2016 p1; Nine Ladies, English Heritage.).

As is the case with the Merry Maidens, the name Nine Ladies comes from a folk story which says that nine women were dancing on the Sabbath, accompanied by a fiddler. They were punished by being turned to stone, with the fiddler becoming the King Stone (Nine Ladies, English Heritage.). This stone circle has been one of the main case studies in my PhD research looking at engagement with archaeological landscapes, and the opportunity to write this blog has allowed me to look at stone circles in different places that have a similar legend.

Nine Ladies, English Heritage.

Why Associate Stories such as this to Stone Circles?

Think about how a similar legend/back story is in different parts of the country – how did this travel? What was the story trying to do? Was it a moral story to try and move people towards Christianity?

Associating legends of people being turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath with stone circles is a fascinating blend of folklore and the enigmatic nature of ancient monuments. Their origins and purposes are largely unknown which gives them an air of mystery, giving rise to a natural place from which folklore and myths can grow.

These legends reinforced social norms and moral/religious beliefs. For example, linking this story of people being turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath can be seen as a moral lesson showing how important respecting the holy day was. The link with stone circles, which are often seen as ancient and sacred spaces, enhances the moral message. As societies changed and developed, so did the stories they told. The moral stories linked to these two stone circles, and probably others as well, could reflect how communities continued to interact with these ancient monuments, re-interpreting them in ways that made sense within their contemporary religious and cultural frameworks.

Stone circles, with their human-sized stones arranged in circular patterns, can easily create an image of people and the idea of the stones being dancers adds a visual and symbolic dimension to the story, making it more vivid and memorable. The impressive presence of stone circles in the landscape might naturally lead to imaginative explanations. The transformation of living beings into stone is a dramatic and visually striking idea that can easily capture the imagination, providing a supernatural explanation for the presence of these mysterious stones.

Stone Circles as Part of Today's Social Landscape.

Today, stone circles provide visitors with a real connection to the distant past, as they allow us to walk in the footsteps of those who once gathered around these stones. Ancient stone circles, including well-known examples such as Stonehenge in England or the Ring of Brodgar in Scotland, and lesser-known examples such as Nine Ladies, continue to play significant roles in today's social landscape. Their relevance spans cultural, historical, educational, and even spiritual aspects of modern life. Archaeological walks, such as routes along the South West Coastal Path, allow walkers to visit these stone circles.

Stone circles are an important part of our cultural heritage and identity as regional and national symbols and are also important for tourism as they attract millions of visitors each year. However, high visitor numbers can sometimes threaten the integrity of these sites, leading to debates about how best to balance public access with conservation.

They also have historical and archaeological significance in terms of research and education. They offer insights into the lives, beliefs, and practices of ancient civilisations and are used by museums, schools and universities as educational tools. They are also preserved for future generations and reflect values regarding the conservation of historical monuments.

Many stone circles have also inspired contemporary art, literature, music, video games and performance, highlighting their continued influence on modern creativity. They are filled with symbolic meanings ranging from mystery and magic to ancient wisdom.

It is also important here to briefly note that stone circles are seen by some as sacred spaces, being used for gatherings and festivals during solstices and equinoxes, fostering a sense of community and continuity with ancient traditions. This is a sensitive topic and is not the focus of this blog, however, it is still important to mention.

Conclusions

Ancient stone circles are deeply woven into the fabric of today's social landscape. They serve as educational resources, spiritual hubs, cultural symbols, and community gathering points, reflecting their enduring significance across various facets of modern life. Legends such as those at the Merry Maidens and Nine Ladies show us a way to connect the distant past with the present, using stories to tell important social and religious values at different times. It also satisfies our natural human curiosity about the ancient world and the unknown of the past. Hopefully this blog has provided some understanding of stone circles and how they are still important today.

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