TEACHERS' NOTES: STONE CIRCLES

Monuments of Stone

Ancient monoliths – standing stones – are among Britain's most iconic landmarks. Stone circles such as Stonehenge in Wiltshire and Calanais on the Isle of Lewis (below) are formed of between four and 60 standing stones. These monuments typically date to the Neolithic (c. 4000 BC-2500 BC) or Bronze Age (c. 2500 BC-500 BC) and may be a progression from an earlier tradition of creating circles of upright timbers; at some sites, stones replaced earlier timbers. They are often built in striking locations, on ridges or mounds with splendid views of the landscape all around.

Construction and Materials

Calanais Stone Circle © Tom Richardson (cc-by-sa/2.0)

We don't know exactly how these massive monuments were built. Some of the stones used at Stonehenge, for example, were brought in from over 250 km away, from Wales, but recent research has shown that many of the larger stones were sourced fairly locally, around 15km to the north of the site. Part of the journey of the stones from Wales was probably carried out over sea using rafts, but the remainder of the journey was probably carried out over land using logs as rollers. The stones were then shaped, tipped into deep holes and pulled upright using ropes and timber structures. They were secured into place with lots of rubble. Monuments like these, and other massive prehistoric structures such as brochs, show that people in the past were skilled architects, engineers and builders. There may have been experts who travelled from place to place, instructing communities on how to build these impressive structures.

What Were They For?

The purpose of standing stones is not well understood, but they may have had some ritual or spiritual significance, perhaps associated with the solar calendar. Some sites appear to have been constructed so that the stones formed alignments with the sunrise on certain significant days such as the summer solstice. The equinox and solstice were likely important dates in the prehistoric farming calendar, marking a change in the seasons and a turning point in the year. They may also have served as markers in the landscape. Few stone circles have been excavated, but it is not uncommon to find burials within or close to the circles.

Extraordinary and Everyday

Stonehenge and Calanais are exceptional examples - monoliths on a truly monumental scale. Most standing stones, stone circles and stone settings (monoliths arranged in a non-circular plan) are more modest in scale. Yadlee stone circle, for example, comprises nine stones forming a low ring, with a further 17 stones scattered mostly to the south and west. A study by students at Edinburgh University noted intervisibility and possible alignments between Yadlee stone circle and others in the landscape: on the spring equinox at sunrise with Witches Cairn, and at sunset with Rook Law Cairn; and at sunset on the winter solstice with

Whiteadder
Historic Heart of the Lammermuirs

Spartleton Cairn. This means that, to someone standing at Yadlee stone circle on the given dates, the sun appears to rise or set from behind the other monuments.

Talking Points

Why do you think people created stone circles?
The stones are very heavy. How do you think they were moved into place in a time before modern machines such as cranes and JCBs were invented?
How do you think it would feel to watch the sun rise or set from a stone circle?
If you were going to build a stone circle, where would you put it? Is there a location nearby that you think would make a good spot for a stone circle?

Activities and Resources

On the website you'll find:

- Two creative writing activities
- A video detailing how to make a stone circle sunrise silhouette image using capillary action

Useful Links

English Heritage's page on building Stonehenge: https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/building-stonehenge/
BBC Bitesize page on Stonehenge: https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/z82hsbk/articles/zg8q2hv
Historic Scotland page on Calanais: https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/calanais-standing-stones/history/
Virtual reconstruction of a stone circle by researchers at the University of St Andrews: https://vimeo.com/273858929
Learning resource on recumbent stone circles by Forestry and Land Scotland (previously Forestry Commission Scotland). A learning resource loan box is also available on request: https://forestryandland.gov.scot/what-we-do/biodiversity-and-conservation/historic-environment-conservation/learning/recumbent-stone-circles