

TEMPLEBRYAN STONE CIRCLE: ANTIQUARIANS' PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

In Ireland, stone circles occur mainly in the Cork/Kerry region and in Ulster. The Ulster series tend to consist of clusters of circles, each circle containing numerous small stones, while the stone circles in the Cork–Kerry series usually comprise an odd number of larger stones ranging from five to nineteen in number. Typically, the stones in the Cork–Kerry series are symmetrically arranged so that the shortest one, called the axial or recumbent stone, lies opposite the two tallest, which are considered the entrance or portal stones. They generally decrease in height from the entrance stones to the axial stone. The circles were probably built between 1600 BC and 800 BC, during the Middle and Late Bronze Age (O'Brien 2012, 155), although it has been argued that some large coastal stone circles in West Cork – including Templebryan and Bohonagh – may have been constructed as early as 2000 BC (Burl 2000, 266, 269). The Cork–Kerry circles are generally aligned so that a line joining the middle of the axial stone to the centre of the gap between the entrance stones is to the west or south-west horizon. This may have been a 'religious imperative, which might be compared to the Christian custom of aligning

churches in an east–west direction' (O'Brien 2012, 158). It has been argued that the function of stone circles was of a ritual or ceremonial nature based around a cult of sun worship. Excavations sometimes reveal human remains, predominantly in the form of cremations, as well as some grave goods, which testify to a funerary function (Feen 2011). The cremations may have been added at a significantly later time than the construction of the circles; according to Burl (2000, 269) the burials may have been placed there 'by people of different beliefs, who regarded the ancient abandoned structure as a fitting shrine for the interment of one of their dead'.

A total of fourteen stone circles occur in an area to the west and north-west of Clonakilty, extending as far as Glandore to the west and Drinagh to the north-west. The majority of these are, like Templebryan, classified as multiple-stone stone circles by the National Monuments Service (NMS), meaning they contain seven or more stones.

Templebryan Stone Circle

Templebryan stone circle is situated in a field 2km north of Clonakilty town and c. 500m south of the Argideen River. It is in the townland of Templebryan North, approximately 400m south-west of Ballyvahallig (Shannonvale) Crossroads, and immediately west of the road leading to Shannonvale from Clonakilty, i.e. the old road from Clonakilty to Bandon. The stone circle now consists of five large stones (ranging in height from 1.3m to 1.9m), one of which has fallen; a smaller (sixth) stone (0.7m high), containing a large amount of quartz,¹ lies roughly in the centre of the circle (Fig. 1). The fallen stone is leaning at a low angle to the ground, with its base still embedded in the soil. Power *et al.* (1992, 23) claimed that the circumference of the circle originally comprised nine stones and that the remaining stones possibly include axial and entrance stones.

It is interesting to note that in an adjoining field to the north-west there is an early ecclesiastical enclosure, within which are the ruins of a church and graveyard, souterrains, a bullaun stone and a large, tapering standing stone (3.3m high) bearing an inscribed cross and ogham inscription. Although the ecclesiastical site – which was founded some time during the early medieval period (c. AD 500–1200) and probably before the ninth century – clearly

Templebryan Stone Circle



Fig. 1: Templebryan stone circle (Photo: author, 2012).

dates to a much later period than the stone circle, it is possible that the standing stone was placed in position at the time of the circle's erection.² If so, the ogham and cross were later added to the stone, ogham inscriptions and Christianity appearing in Ireland by at least the fifth century AD. Without excavation, however, we cannot be sure of its prehistoric origins. This paper, however, is not concerned with the ogham and cross inscriptions, nor indeed the ecclesiastical foundation.

Antiquarian Reports

This paper explores descriptions and analyses of Templebryan stone circle made by antiquarians – the forerunners of modern archaeologists – between the mid-eighteenth century and the early twentieth century. As early as 1742, a survey of Templebryan stone circle was carried out by the Anglican bishop of Cork and Ross, Robert Clayton, who later became bishop of Clogher. This appeared in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society (Clayton 1742–3, 581–90). He described the stone circle as ‘the Remains of an antient Temple in Ireland of the same sort as the famous Stonehenge’ (*ibid.*, 581). At

that time, he reported that there were nine stones in the circle, with a smaller (tenth) stone standing in the centre. One of the orthostats stood directly at the northern point and another at the western point, while the other two compass points marked gaps between pairs of adjacent stones. He supplied a plan (Fig. 2) and a drawing of the circle (Fig. 3) created by Ann la Bushe in 1742 (the name which appears under the drawing), who is identified elsewhere as artist Letitia Bushe (Waddell 2005, 60-1; O'Brien 2012, 12); both illustrations feature an outlying monolith, which Clayton concluded was a memorial to the burial place 'of some eminent Person, either the Prince or Priest of the Country or probably both' (Clayton 1742-3, 585). This outlying monolith, he asserted, was similar to the obelisks in Egypt, 'being Ten Feet high, and Two Feet square at the Bottom, diminishing gradually to a Point at the Top' (*ibid.*, 587). This description of the monolith, together with a reference to its location as a burial place for 'antient Popish Families' (*ibid.*, 586), indicates that he was referring to the standing stone in the early ecclesiastical enclosure nearby. He also claimed that the stones had been worked to a particular shape, especially the 'obelisk' (the standing stone) and the stone identified as number seven in the plan (Fig. 2).

Clayton's description and illustrations of Templebryan stone circle are of great significance because just over a decade later, Dr Charles Smith (1754, 418), in his history of Cork, recounted that at Templebryan there were then six circumference stones and one central stone, 'some of the stones being carried away by the country people for different uses'. Where they did survive, he noted that the distance from one stone to the next was 'about four feet' (*ibid.*). He remarked that no two stones in the circle were in line with the central stone, even if the positions of the removed stones were included. He concluded that the stones removed were 'the stone which stood in the west point ... and two others towards the east side' (*ibid.*, 418-19). In agreement with Clayton, he referred to the standing stone in the nearby enclosure as 'a stone obelisk, ten feet high, in sight of this circle', and reiterated that it was the burial place of 'some noted person' (*ibid.*, 418).³ He also claimed that another standing stone could be seen 'about a mile south-east on top of another hill' (*ibid.*, 419); this is possibly a reference to a standing stone in the nearby townland of Gallanes, which is now not *in situ* (Power *et al.* 1992, 56).

Richard Pococke, while bishop of Ossory, went on tour of the south and

Templebryan Stone Circle

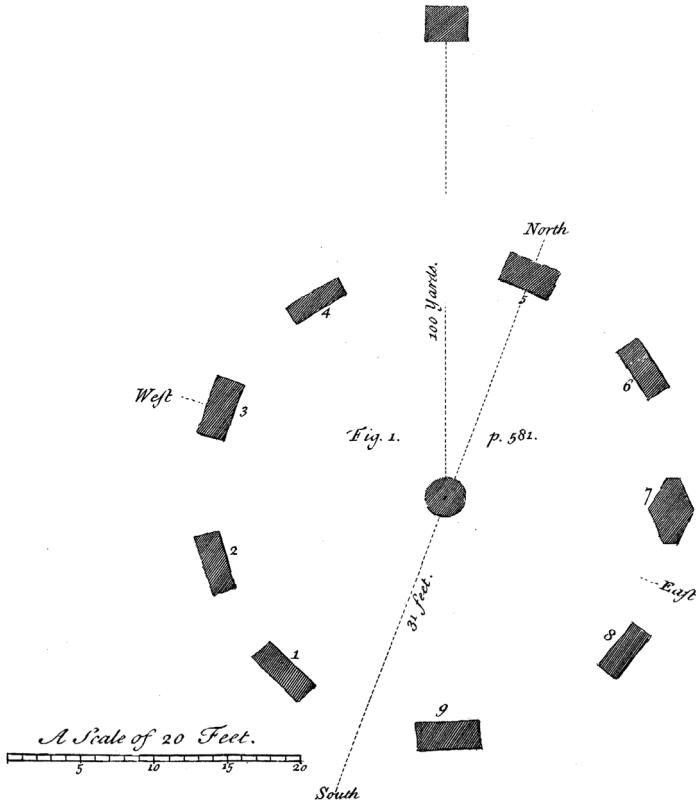


Fig. 2: Plan of Templebryan stone circle (Clayton 1742–3, 589).

south-west of Ireland, visiting Templebryan stone circle in 1758. Although his description is far from clear, it appears that there still remained six stones in the circle, in addition to the central stone (Ó Maidín 1958, 78). Pococke also referred to the standing stone near the church which he declared was ‘about seven feet high’ (*ibid.*), and added that there was another directly east of the circle, a further possible reference to the stone in Gallanes.

Reverend Horatio Townsend (1810; 1815), director and vicar of the Union of Kilgarriff, undertook a statistical survey of Co. Cork for the Dublin Society in the early nineteenth century. He prefaced the section ‘Antiquities,

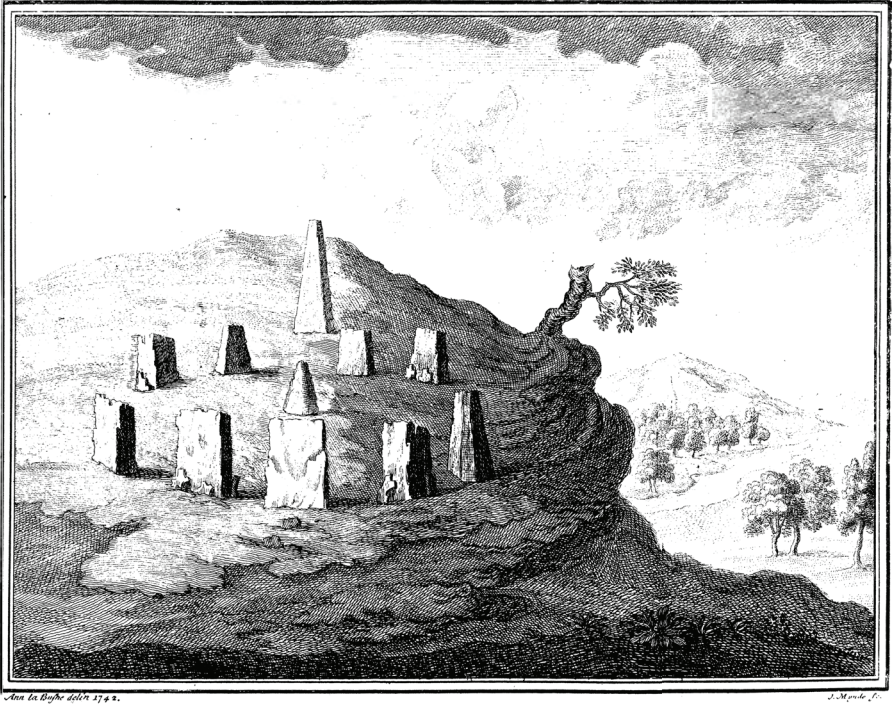


Fig. 3: Artist's sketch of Templebryan stone circle (Clayton 1742–3, 589).

previous and Subsequent to Christianity' by stating that 'as all that remain are vestiges only of the rude and barbarous, we are induced to conclude that before the Christian aera, and for a great time after it, the inhabitants of this country were in a state of the lowest ignorance' (Townsend 1810, 101); when referring to stone circles and other ancient monuments, he deemed 'art ... an improper term for work so rude' (*ibid.*). In reference to Templebryan stone circle, Townsend disagreed with Smith's assertion that no two of the stones were in line with the central stone; in a footnote, he critically commented that 'his [Smith's] account is in many particulars so erroneous that if he did visit it [Templebryan stone circle] he must have written it from a very imperfect recollection' (*ibid.*, 110). Townsend (1810, 109-10; 1815, 114-15) reported that only five of the circle's stones retained their upright positions pointing out that

Templebryan Stone Circle

some of them had been knocked ‘in the expectation of finding hidden treasure’. Due to ‘the same avaricious curiosity’, he stated that a similar fate had befallen the standing stone in the churchyard but the local people had re-erected it out of religious reverence; however, he declared that they had no such respect for the stone circle nor any concept of its former function (Townsend 1810, 110-11; 1815, 115). The central stone within the circle, he observed, was of white quartz and was barely visible due to a fence dividing the circle. Townsend referred to another description of the stone circle by antiquarian Dr Ledwich, whom he quoted as stating that the circle encompassed ‘a central pyramidal pillar’. Townsend (1810, 109-11) maintained this was incorrect, the central stone being a round white one.

In volume one of Samuel Lewis’ *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Templebryan stone circle is described as ‘a tolerably perfect druidical temple, some of the stones of which are nearly as large as those of Stonehenge’ (1837, vol. 1, 348). In the second volume, it is described as ‘the remains of a very extensive heathen temple; six of the stones still exist, the centre one being of white quartz and much larger than the rest’ (1837, vol. 2, 602). This appears to be the first unambiguous reference to five circle stones with an additional central (sixth) stone – the same number as currently survives. The erroneous reference to the central stone being larger than the rest may have been taken from Dr Ledwich’s statement of ‘a central pyramidal pillar’. Unlike previous accounts, Lewis interpreted the standing stone in the ecclesiastical enclosure as the shaft of a fourteenth-century cross, set up by the Knights Templars (*ibid.*). This unsubstantiated link with the Knights Templars reappeared in a letter by Thomas A. Larcom (1842–5).

The stone circle was marked on the first edition Ordnance Survey (OS) 6-inch map, which was produced in 1841 and on the second edition OS 25-inch map, surveyed in 1900. Both editions depict a circle made up of five stones, with a sixth in the centre. The standing stone in the ecclesiastical enclosure in the adjoining field is marked ‘Gallaun’ in the 1841 colour OS map, ‘Monumental Pillar’ in both the 1841 black and white and the 1900 OS maps, and ‘*Clogbnakilla*’ (probably meaning ‘stone of the church’) in two sketches in the mid-nineteenth century which appear in the OS *Cork Memoranda* (O’Donovan and Larcom 1842–5, 211-12). One of sketches also illustrates the

five-stone stone circle, with central (sixth) stone, as well as the standing stone depicting the cross carving (Fig. 4).

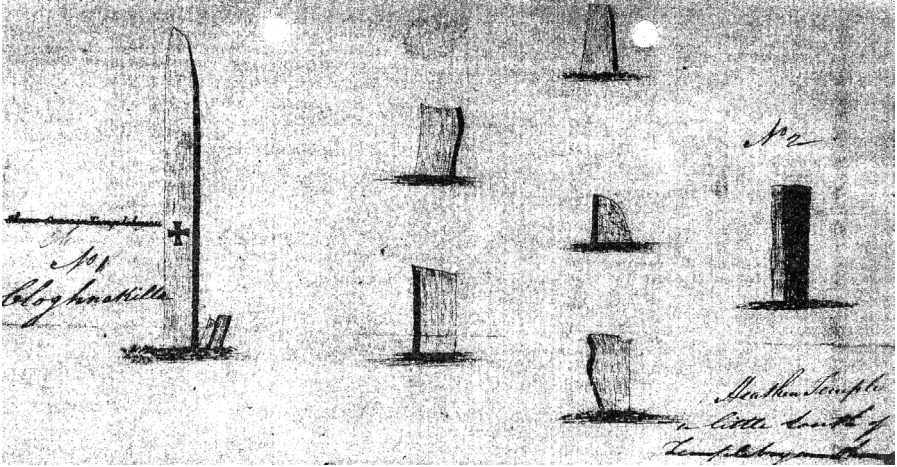


Fig. 4: Sketch of Templebryan stone circle and *Cloghnakilla* (O'Donovan and Larcom 1842-5, 211-12).

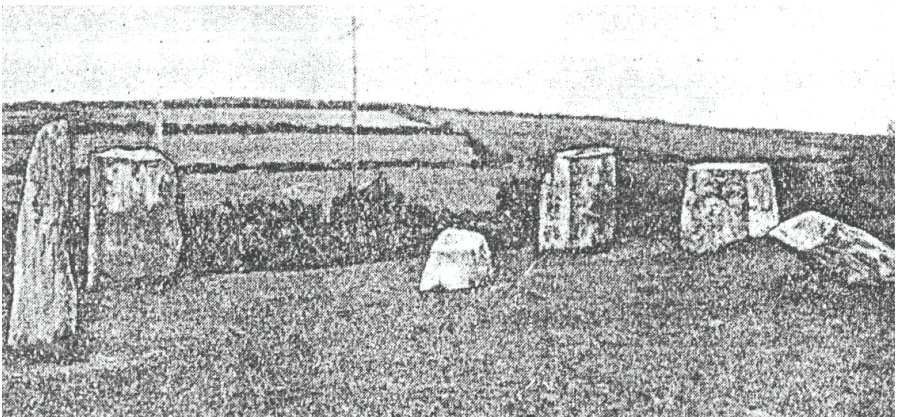


Fig. 5: Templebryan stone circle (Crawford 1906, 263).

Templebryan Stone Circle

Henry S. Crawford (1906, 263) contrasted the condition of the stone circle in the early twentieth century with its condition in the mid-eighteenth century. He stated that four of the nine stones in the circle had been removed, ‘apparently alternate ones’ (*ibid.*). He remarked that if Clayton’s sketch was accurate, the central quartz stone may have been broken at the top. He commented that while he had seen many examples of monoliths in close proximity to stone circles, this was, to his knowledge, the only example with a stone at the centre. Crawford (*ibid.*, 264) disagreed with Clayton’s claim that the stones had been worked to shape, seeing no evidence for it. He provided a contemporary photograph of the stone circle (Fig. 5), as well as the nearby standing stone (Crawford 1906, 262). The condition of the stone circle has changed little to the present day (compare Figs 1 and 5).

According to R. A. S. Macalister (1907, 69) an extract from a Clonakilty paper, referred to a James Coleman of Ballinascorthy, a noted ‘archaeologist, antiquarian and an authority on ancient customs and literature’ in his day. The article recounted that thirty-five years previous, Coleman was said to have excavated the base of the standing stone in the ecclesiastical enclosure and to have found a skeleton, with a thigh bone ‘29 inches long’ (*ibid.*). According to Macalister (*ibid.*, footnote 1) this would indicate ‘a stature of about 9 feet 8 inches!’.

The skull was intact and very large, so much so that Coleman could insert his closed fist into the socket of the eye. The teeth were perfect, showing that the possessor must have been in the flower of manhood when his life was ended, but, most extraordinary, the teeth all round the mouth were double, or what we call “grinders” (*ibid.*, 70).

It was reported that Coleman decided to send the skull to the Antiquarian Society of Dublin for investigation. While awaiting its transportation, the skull was kept in Coleman’s home. On the second night, according to the reporter: ‘things began to hum a bit, as if there was an earthquake in the house’ (*ibid.*). Coleman, fearful of worse to come, ‘carried the skull carefully and reverently back to its resting-place at Templebryan and, as far as possible returned everything to its previous condition, and there was peace once again’



Fig. 6: Farmer at standing stone (Macalister 1907, 68).

(*ibid.*). Such folkloric tales linking standing stones with giants are common in antiquarian reports of the time. Macalister (1907, 68) included a photograph of the standing stone (Fig. 6); interestingly, despite the in-depth attention that it previously received, Macalister (1906, 260) was the first to record its ogham inscription.

A More Scientific Approach

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henry Boyle Townshend Somerville, a native of Castletownshend and a pioneer of archaeoastronomy, took an interest in stone circles on a more scientific level. In 1909, he published his survey on Drombeg stone circle, identifying for the first time its design for ‘astronomical purposes’ and its alignment to the winter solstice sunset (Somerville 1909, 105-6). Some two decades later, in 1930, he published a survey of five stone circles in West Cork, which included sketches of the circles, details of their orientation and descriptions of the stones. While he included circles in the nearby Rosscarbery and Reenascreena regions, unfortunately he did not survey Templebryan. Nevertheless, the implications for applying his theories to other stone circles, such as Templebryan, had far-reaching consequences into the future. His pioneering work changed forever the way stone circles were viewed and studied.

Conclusion

Antiquarian reports and sketches are often regarded as being of little use, superseded as they were by more scientific methods of archaeological study. Yet without the painstaking attention to detail pursued by the antiquarians of the recent past we would have missed out on a very important link with the more remote past. In this instance, the work, in particular, of Robert Clayton and artist Letitia Bushe in the mid-eighteenth century, and that of others in later years, has given us a remarkable insight into the stones of Templebryan stone circle as they once were.

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Templebryan Stone Circle

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(Endnotes)

1 Quartz appears to have a particular significance at stone circles (Feen 2011). In a study of forty-eight multiple-stone stone circles in Cork and Kerry undertaken by Ó Nualláin in the 1980s, five had internal monoliths containing quartz (Ó Nualláin 1984, 7).

2 Associated monuments are a feature of some stone circles; these include single outlying standing stones, stone pairs and boulder burials.

3 Georgiana Chatterton (1839, 36-7) – not having visited the site herself – referred to Smith's (1754) description of a 'Druidical stone circle' and obelisk at 'Temple Brian', and incorrectly claimed that in 1836 four of the circle stones and the obelisk had been removed.

