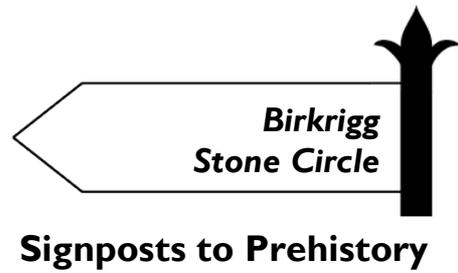




THE
PREHISTORIC
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Location: Birkrigg stone circle (SD 292 739) lies on the SE side of Birkrigg Common, 5 km south of Ulverston in South Cumbria, overlooking Morecambe Bay.

Main period: Bronze Age

Access & ownership: Access is very easy. A minor road leaves the A5078 about 2 km south of the village of Bardsea, leading over Birkrigg Common. From a small parking area, a path leads a short distance to the circle.



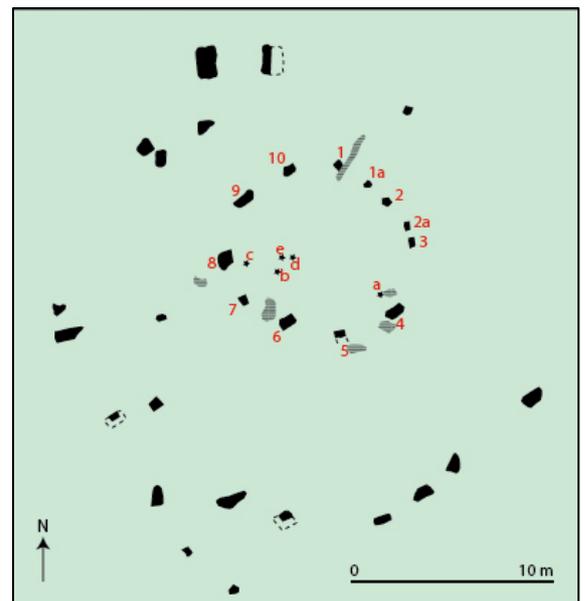
Fig. 1. Birkrigg 'Druids' Circle overlooking the village of Bardsea and Morecambe Bay. Paul Allison [CC BY-SA 2.0]

Birkrigg stone circle ('Druids Circle') is a rare example of a concentric stone circle with two rings of stones (Figs 1 & 2). Only 30 or so such monuments are known in Britain, the most famous being Stonehenge.

The outer ring is made up of 20 stones, placed irregularly, to form a circle of 24 m diameter. The stones are small, and may be obscured by bracken or covered by turf. A large gap in the NE arc may be intended, but may just be the result of stone robbing over the centuries.

The inner circle is more imposing, with 12 larger stones forming a circle of 8.5 m diameter. They appear to alternate from tall to short around the circle, the tallest stone being around 1 m in height; all but two lean into the centre.

Fig. 2 Plan of Birkrigg stone circle. After Waterhouse 1985, fig. 3.2 & Geldert 1922, 348



They are all of the local Carboniferous limestone—possibly quarried from a nearby outcrop—and heavily weathered, especially on the S and SW sides that face the prevailing weather. The very regular shape of some of the stones may indicate that they were dressed before being placed in position. The circle was excavated in 1911 and 1921 by the North Lonsdale Field Club. Although 19th century antiquarians had identified 12 stones in the inner ring, only 10 were noted by the excavators in 1911; two additional stones noted subsequently were numbered 1b and 2b (see Fig. 1).

On removing the turf from the centre of the inner ring, the Field Club found a pavement of cobbles that extended to the outer ring. These stones were ‘blue rag’ (slate), not locally available and that must have been carefully chosen and brought to the site. Beneath the stone pavement, separated by a thin layer of soil, a second, less extensive layer of similar cobbles was found. Around the upright boulders of the inner circle, the paving included larger cobbles, many of which were flat, set on end, and tightly packed, perhaps intended to support the standing stones.

A systematic survey of the inner area revealed that the cobbles covered a number of cremation burials. At point **a** (Fig. 2), a flat stone measuring 660 × 480 mm formed part of the lower pavement. It was tightly packed around with cobbles that were smaller than those used for the rest of the layer. Beneath it were fragments of calcined bones, lying on a third layer of cobbles that formed a shallow dish. Nearby were two halves of a disc of fine sandstone, with very sharp edges (Fig. 3). The disc was examined by the eminent archaeologist Canon Greenwell, who concluded that it was a worked tool, probably a knife, intended to cut meat or soft material.

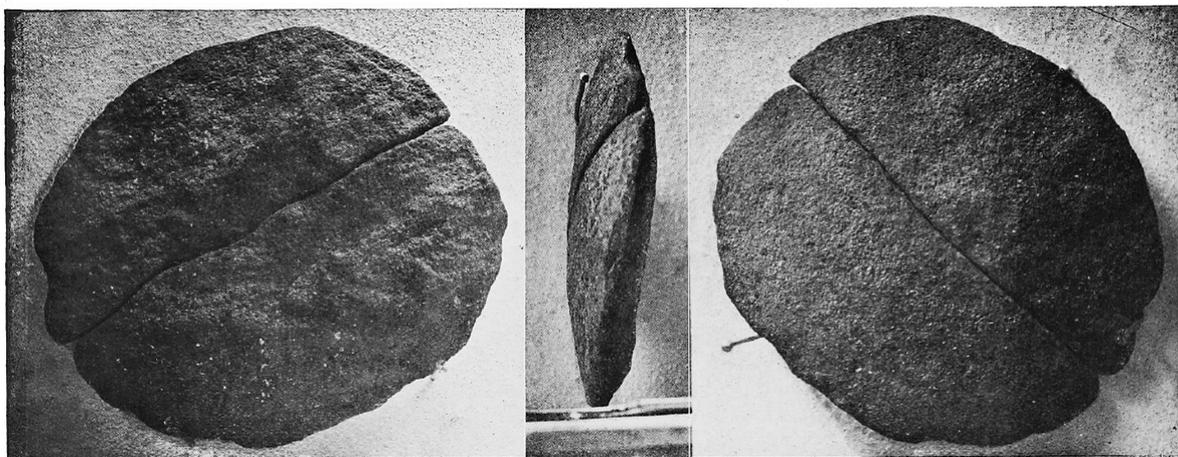


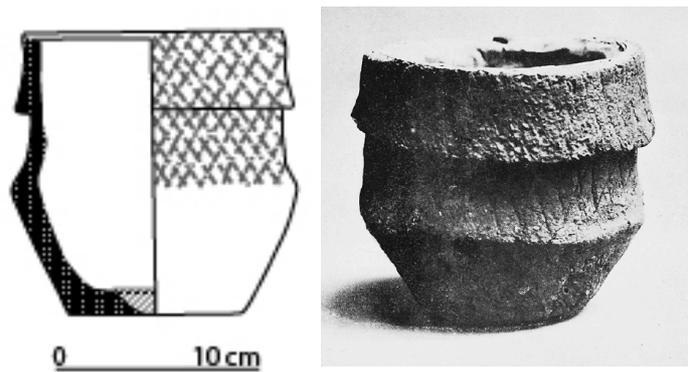
Fig. 3. Sandstone ‘knife’ found at Birkrigg. Image by permission of Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society from Geldert & Dobson 1912, 276. Copyright reserved

Beneath the ‘dish’ of cobbles containing the bones, excavators found loose earth filling a depression matching the size and shape of the stone covering the burial, and extending to a depth of about 150 mm. Below this, about 0.6 m beneath the turf, was an area of dark, loamy earth, 50–70 mm deep, that extended beyond the area of the burial. Analysis showed this to contain no charcoal but high levels of manganese oxide were present. Several similar areas of dark earth were found around the circle, shown as grey patches in Figure 2.

Other interments at points **b**, **c**, and **d** consisted of calcined bones and charcoal in shallow pits. At point **e**, 0.5 m beneath the lower pavement, a collared urn of Early Bronze Age style was found inverted over black, earthy material, charcoal, and calcined bones. The urn, reconstructed, stands to 134 mm and has a rim diameter of 126 mm (Fig. 4). It is decorated with a lattice of twisted cord at 6 mm intervals. Reddish-brown in colour, it is made of a mixture of fine and coarse grits. The urn was sadly smashed by ‘unlucky pushes of the spade’ (Barnes 1970, 13) and inaccurately reconstructed in the 1920s using ‘a fearsome assortment of materials including cement, plaster of Paris, builders’ plaster and wax.’ In 1970, F. Barnes noted that the interior had a thick lining of

cement, the diameter was exaggerated and the height curtailed (Fig. 4a). He dismantled, conserved and reconstructed the pot. Figure 4b shows his more accurate interpretation.

Fig. 4. Collared urn a) as first reconstructed (Geldert & Dobson 1912); and b) as corrected by Barnes (after Barnes 1970 fig. 1-1). Images by permission of Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society. Copyright reserved.



In 1921, excavation of the area between the rings produced three objects that may have had a ceremonial function. A pear-shaped piece of stone, 15 cm long, may have been a pestle for grinding pigments. Near to it was an oyster-shaped stone with a 'handle' and a circular depression carefully flaked out of the centre—perhaps a palette? The third find was a piece of red ochre, not of local origin. We can only speculate about how these three items were used.

References and further information

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- Gelder, G. & Dobson, J. 1922. Report on the further excavations carried out at the "Druid's Circles," on Birkrigg in the parish of Urswick, September-October, 1921. *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society* 22, 346–52
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