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The Use of Technology for Further Consideration of a Standing Stone Circle

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Within the social sciences, the technological advances in archaeology and qualitative research have occurred not only in the span of the last 250 years, but also in as few as the last 10 years. When discussing these changes in relationship to stone circles, it is logical to presume that technology refers to physical implements used within the site; that the term 'advancement' indicates the advancement from a small trowel to a geophysical survey. Instead, what this paper is going to briefly explore is how the changes in technology was used to help answer the question posed within that time frame. This investigation is a small part of my PhD research, which looks at Christian worship buildings within the same geographic landscape as other non-Christian and ancient sacred sites, which include stone circles, Pictish stones and venerated natural elements.

The case study for this paper is Christchurch, more commonly known as Midmar Church; a post-reformation church found in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Originally dedicated to St. Nidian, a disciple of St Kentigern and the teachings of Iona, the name was changed once it was rebuilt. Well into its post-reformation position in 1787, the well-regarded and long standing minister, Reverend John Ogilvie, changed the location of the place of worship from a small glen next to a former Norman manse and created a completely new building on top of a hill, less than one mile away (A – PKO Records, CH2/602/3/386 – 387 & A – PKO Records, CH2/602/4/22-23). Building on a higher plane is not unique to the Roman Catholic Church or to the Church of Scotland; yet, what does make this location interesting is that it was built beside a standing stone circle; one that currently still occupies the same land, though there is debate

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concerning the claim that pieces of it have been moved (Welfare & Halliday, 2011). It is important to understand the reasoning behind that decision, however, there is no documentation providing this insight. Part of the scope for my PhD research is using contextual evidence to make that determination, yet in the interest of brevity and keeping with the required paper length for this conference, that subject will not be addressed at this time.

During the 19th century, the desire for a better understanding of stone circles and standing stones (along with other ancient artefacts within the Scottish landscape) also aids in preservation and documentation of many of the stones within the landscapes (RCAHMS, 2007, p. 13). Although agricultural development caused the dismantlement of many stone circles, within Aberdeenshire a large number remain, encompassed by farm land or forests. Some of these early documentations were chronicled by John Stuart, Charles Dalrymple and Andrew Jervis. While we most importantly owe the term 'recumbent stone' to Dalrymple, who used it early on in place of 'altar stone' (Welfare & Halliday, 2011), it was Joseph Anderson who made the term the preferred vocabulary for a stone lying on its side, most commonly flanked by two upright stones (Anderson, 1886). The changing vocabulary revealed the transformation of perceptions of how stone circles participated in the physical and the human landscape. Cataloguing of Midmar Parish stone circle began with a method still used today: pencil and paper. Colonel Jonathan Forbes-Leslie was well known in the 19th century for his sketches on standing stones and stone circles of Aberdeenshire. Using a similar style of sketching for notating location of the stones within their natural landscape for multiple sites (including Sunhoney and Ardair), Forbes-Leslie focused on the details of the surrounding fauna and the hills seen through the flanking stones over the recumbent (1866, p. 220). In contrast, Christian MacLagan, a Scottish antiquarian, focused on drawing stone circles in a more clinical or scientific way. In 1875 she published a book titled, *The hill forts: Stone circles and other structural remains of ancient Scotland,* in which she had multiple sketches of different stone circles, including Midmar. These sketches showed the placement of the stones in relationship to each other and nothing else, going so far as to portray the circle from an aerial view. Her judgement as to the purpose of stone circles being entrances to burial grounds and that the recumbent stone was originally a lintel (1894, p. 16; 1875, p. 9) was

derided by her peers. Alfred Lewis thought of her as 'careless and unreliable' and that the content of her drawing was often selective and corrupted by her own perspective (Lewis, 1888 cited Welfare & Halliday, 2011, p. 215). As excavation work was becoming prominent in the 19th century, conflicting views on the purpose of stone circles influenced what information was being given to the community at large (RCAHMS, 2007. P. 11; Burl, 1999, pp. 23-24).

However, as technology changes, so does the expectation of preference in its uses. Graham, within *The Scottish Historical Review*, states that since Stuart's book was published (in 1856), more stones have been located and "photography has transformed the process of illustrating them, and the earnest study of some fifty years has, as might be expected, brought together a mass of new material" (1903, p. 58). Photographs of Midmar during the early 20th century focus more on documenting the placement of the stones within the circle and less on the placement of the stones within the landscape (Canmore.org.uk, 2015). Some found through the Canmore website focus on the documentation through ordinance surveys, however, moving to the mid-20th century there are more photographs showing the stone circle as part of a larger landscape, including the church.

Significant changes in technology in the 20th and early 21st century allow us to expand the questions of the purpose of stone circles. Take into account the work done by Dr. Elizabeth Curtis. Her doctoral thesis discussed how the stone circles were established as parts of the landscape by those investigating the sites in the 19th century, using archaeology as a science. Just as Stuart, Dalrymple and others listed above, she also focused on sites in the Northeast of Scotland. Curtis also utilised cameras to support her research; however, she progressed to the use of disposable cameras and paper surveys left at multiple sites. Even with this advancement in the type of technology used, some cameras were damaged due to weather-related issues, including one at Midmar (Curtis, 2011, p. 29), and surveys were lost. In spite of this, there were multiple photographs from other sites (i.e. Easter Aquohorthies in Inverurie) plus reflections of visitors noted on the surveys. The photographs were taken by those visiting the site, and the majority of them viewed the stone circle itself as the focal point of the landscape, while still including other aspects that surrounded it. For instance, one photograph included two children sitting by a recumbent stone, while another photo

showed a shadow of someone upon a flanking stone, as though they were part of, but not impeding upon, the landscape. The survey results further supported the sentiment that, to the viewer, the sites represented “heritage” and were seen as “sacred” (Curtis, 2011, pp. 248-249 & 258).

As I come into my own research, started in 2014, the considerable changes of technology have allowed me to explore the relationship between the stone circles and the community in greater detail, locally and worldwide. The technologies I am using is known, yet the manner in which I employ them is out with the typical function. Within this research, I utilise site specific QR codes which enable me to direct visitors to a website with a survey, aerial studies of sites to better view the geographic location of the site in relation to its surrounding landscape, digital maps from the National Library of Scotland, using programs such as Hawksey and Hashtagify which permits me to extract data using specific keywords, plus focus groups that are facilitated through social media. The positive aspects of these tools are that they enable me to connect with a global network of people at any time of day or night. Some negative ramifications are that not everyone will have mobile access to take the surveys and/or may not have internet access or be on social media so that they are aware of the focus groups or to share their views. To reduce this concern, all sites will still contain paper surveys, and advertisements for focus groups are still being placed in local newspapers and newsletters. Most importantly, word of mouth is still the most effective form of technology. In each of the above instances, it is important to remember that as technology is changing, so are the ethics that relate to them (University of Aberdeen, Townsend and Wallace, 2016). The focus groups and direct interviews require participants to fill out forms advising that they give permission to use their answers for research purposes. However, concerns may be over how some of the direct interviews are found. Using Hawksey and Hastagify to see who posts (publicly) about the landscapes I am researching, I can then reach out to them (private message).

In conclusion, technology has changed in such a way that much of the study on stone circles can be done from the comfort of an office. From finding surveys and documents on websites such as Canmore or Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), digital images through Scran (part of Historic Environment of Scotland), accessing Special Collections at many universities, or

viewing digital copies of the original session minutes of the Church of Scotland, it is easy and simple to utilise technology to aide in research. However, as much as these technological changes can help in this area of research, they can also hinder. For instance, they may prevent us from 'going back to basics' and talking to others, or reading the physical letters (as compared to digitised versions) written about Rev Ogilvie, possibly missing a key piece of information we would never have seen otherwise. The use of both forms of technology (digital and analogue) allows for a more comprehensive result than would have been previously achieved.

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A – PKO Records, CH2/602/4/22-23
Presbytery of Kincardine O'Neil, Records of, March 28th, 1787

Within this circle stood five trilithons of dressed sarsen stone arranged in a horseshoe shape 13.7 metres (45 ft) across with its open end facing north east. These huge stones, ten uprights and five lintels, weigh up to 50 tons each. They were linked using complex jointing. They are arranged symmetrically. The smallest pair of trilithons were around 6 metres (20 ft) tall, the next pair a little higher and the largest, single trilithon in the south west corner would have been 7.3 metres (24 ft) tall. Only one upright from the Great Trilithon still stands, of which 6.7 metres (22 ft) is visible Further, during more recent excavations in 2013, they found more than 50,000 cremated human bones in some of the chalk filling, which were originally buried individually in the Aubrey holes. Despite the discovery of human remains, it is assumed that the holes themselves werenâ€™t built as a grave but as a part of a religious ceremony, as the remains are hundreds of years younger than the monument itself.Â The small standing stones were supposedly removed and the holes were purposely filled. The Heelstone, a Tertiary sandstone, is assumed to have been erected during this time, however it cannot be accurately dated.Â Thirty of them were erected as a circle of standing stones with a ring of 30 lintel stones resting on top. Stonehenge, prehistoric stone circle monument, cemetery, and archaeological site located on Salisbury Plain, about 8 miles (13 km) north of Salisbury, Wiltshire, England. It was built in six stages between 3000 and 1520 BCE, during the transition from the Neolithic Period to the Bronze Age.Â Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what youâ€™ve submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share. SHARE.