

The Stones of Ireland

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Not long after you arrive in Ireland and drive along one of hundreds of county roads, perhaps one of the first things you begin to realize, after moving past the lush vivid colors of the rolling hills, are countless stone structures; castle ruins, ancient monasteries, round towers, stone walls, stone circles, standing stones, Ogham stones, Giant's Causeway, the Stone of Destiny (on the Hill of Tara), and standing stones. Stones, stones and more stones! There may be forty shades of green, but it seems there are millions upon millions of rock and stone structures strategically placed all over this Island nation. Some structures are natural, but most are man-made, tributes to the traces of humanity that punctuate the landscape, from the furthest reaches of County Donegal to the most southern point of County Cork. Perhaps it's no coincidence that three of the most popular tourist attractions in Ireland are comprised of stones: the sandstone Cliffs of Moher in County Clare, the stone portal tomb of New Grange in County Meath, and least we forget the Blarney Stone itself, in County Cork.



Hexagonal rock formations at the Giant's Causeway, County Antrim

Geological estimates suggest that about 65 percent of Ireland's rock foundation is limestone, created by millennia upon millennia of calcium deposits from ancient coral structures and countless ocean creatures, long before humans ever walked the earth, much less picked up a rock. The best example of Ireland's limestone is the remote, unforgettable, moonlike landscape of the Burren area in County Clare. And here is a game show answer: One reason why the horses of Ireland are known to have strong bones (and fast speeds) is the nutrient rich grasses that cover much of the limestone landscape in the eastern counties of Eire. Rounding out the geological palette is granite, slate and some of the finest colored marble in the world (as observed inside the church on the grounds of Kylemore Abby).

Like most of planet Earth's landmass today, Ireland's history begins under the sea, but it doesn't end there. Combine countless massive planetary tectonic shifts and ever-changing sea levels and the landmass affectionately known as the Emerald Isle, began to take shape. Fast-forward through

several ice ages with advancing and retreating glaciers and it's not hard to see how a land today so green with fauna is no stranger to boulders, stones and rocks that have, over the millennia, through countless civilizations become part of the cultural landscape. As one local historian from County Clare told me, "Stones don't talk, but they tell stories. If you don't take time to appreciate the stones of Ireland, you really don't see or know Ireland."



One of many pilgrim stones in the valley of Glencolmcill, County Donegal

Circles: Stones of Orientation (celestial calendars)

Not as obvious as the countless castle ruins on Ireland's terra firma, but equally enchanting are countless stone circles scattered all over this Celtic island. Some, like the Uragh stone circle, ten miles south of Kenmare (County Kerry) have as few as five or six stones while others, like the Beltane Stone Circle in County Donegal, contain up to fifty. England's Stonehenge may capture the headlines and imagination of the world, but the stone circles of Ireland are every bit as intriguing, and far less crowded.

Imagine this: If, long ago, you wish to create a planetary navigation tool to the celestial heavens that would last many generations, rather than wood, you might just select some stones, with quartz, for specific markers. Legend has it that each stone placed in a stone circle is selected for its unique vibration. Together in a circle these stones contribute a harmonic vibration that many healers can sense to this day. California may have tree huggers, but Ireland (mostly tourists to Ireland) has stone huggers. Those with a spiritual bent will remind you before you enter the perimeter of a stone circle, that it's best to ask permission (silently from your heart), for you are entering a sacred landscape, and the Irish will tell you, it's best not to mess with the fairies; the circle's gatekeepers.

My first stone circle experience was in County Cork at the Drombeg Stone Circle, perhaps one of the best preserved of Ireland's stone treasures. Drombeg stands as a tribute to the winter solstice, but its magic resonance can be felt any time of year. Directly underneath the stone circle are known to be lay-lines, which the Irish refer to them as "fairy lines," for they extol an energy as well, which is why the stone circles were placed there. A sacred landscape, indeed.



Drombeg Stone Circle, County Cork

Dolmens: Stones of Spiritual Transformation

Very likely, somewhere in your Celtic CD collection, you will find an iconic image of the Poul nabrone Dolmen, a permanent fixture of the Burren region in County Clare; and certainly one of many images that has become synonymous with the ageless tenacity of the Emerald Isle. This stone temple graces the cover of Celtic Thunder's *Heritage* CD, as well as those of countless other groups, and for good reason. Like the pyramids of ancient Egypt (and about as old) the Neolithic Poul nabrone Dolman now symbolizes ageless Celtic wisdom that has withstood the test of time.

We can only guess at its original purpose, though many people suggest, because of a cache of bones discovered years ago, that it was an ancient burial memorial. Others suggest that as a portal tomb, like the name suggests, it served as a means of deepening one's conscious connection to the cosmos. What amazes everyone, regardless of the explanation, is the sheer mass of the capstone placed on top, weighing nearly 7 tons. It took more than a few strong men to lift that into place at a time when world historians remind us, that early civilizations lived a crude lifestyle of meager subsistence.



Poul nabrone Dolmen, County Clare

Art: Stone petro-glyphs

Some of the most impressive stones are those that bear the work of artists that time has long forgotten, but nevertheless celebrated; in this case ancient artists that took the time to carve what we now call Celtic spirals and symbols (then and now) that serve as reminders of the never-ending oneness of life. Look no further than the stunning artwork (both inside and outside) of the portal tombs of New Grange, and Knowth in the Boyne Valley. Like the stone circles that were used as a celestial clock, New Grange is renowned the world over as a window into the soul of Winter Solstice. Beyond its celestial wonder is an array of rock art that to this day inspires the creative spirit.



Ancient spiral pattern carved into the stone that you pass as you enter the New Grange Tomb

Ancient spiral designs are not the only carvings found in stones that still grace the Irish landscape. Another iconic piece of artwork can be found on what appears to be a tombstone in a remote cemetery on Boa Island in County Fermanagh; on each side of this stone are carved faces, giving this the name the Janus headstone. Historians still debate whether this artwork is pre-Christian or Christian influenced. We may never know, but the artist spent great effort to carve a timeless message or tribute. You don't have to go to Boa Island to see faces carved in stone. Scattered across Ireland are several depictions of the ancient fertility goddess, Sheela Na Gig.

While not exactly considered rock art, the ancient Celts left countless messages for themselves and fellow travelers all over Ireland by means of their cryptic alphabet carved in standing stones known today as Ogham (pronounced OM) stones. Originally thought to be cryptic slash markings, a young historian found their true meaning (by accident) while looking up something unrelated at the Trinity College library several decades ago. With this mystery solved, many of these stones have now been moved into museums for safe keeping, though several can still be found scattered around the Dingle Peninsula and County Cork, and they are well worth the search.



Five Ogham stones now adorn the driveway of a private school on the Dingle Peninsula

Stone Houses: From Cottages to Castles

Driving over the mountain pass that brings you down into the quaint village Kenmare, you will see on your left hand side an old stone house that once belonged to Molly Galavin. Today the house is a small tourist destination and gift shop. Some tourists take wonder at the Neolithic summer solstice rock settings behind the house, while still others sample their first drink of Potcheen (Irish moonshine), but for those enamored with all things stone, the house itself is study in geology. Surely Molly's farm house was her castle, but if you should take a fancy to larger accommodations, your study in stone architecture should include the likes of Bunratty Castle, Ashford Castle, and the Blarney Castle.



Molly Galavin's Stone House, County Kerry

Some tourists go to the Emerald Isle for the sound of traditional music and the taste of Guinness. Others, in search of their Irish roots travel across the pond for faint recollections of family history. But for all travelers to the Republic of Ireland, a tale of Irish history would be incomplete without an appreciation of the stones; a metaphorical, if not real foundation of this country's heritage.



Janus Headstone, Boa Island, County Fermanagh

Brian Luke Seaward (of the McNulty and Egan clans) is a regular contributor to The Celtic Connection. Each summer, he takes interested people on group tours (Runes, Ruins and Tunes) to his ancestral homeland each June. For more information contact Brian at www.brianlukeseaward.net