

RING-CAIRNS AND RELATED MONUMENTS IN WALES

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The monuments under consideration here have in the past often been dismissed as eccentric variations on the standard Highland Zone burial cairn and have not been classified or studied in their own right (Grimes, 1963, 95). It is only with the work of W.E. Griffiths on the important complex at Penmaenmawr (Griffiths, 1960) and with his subsequent work for the Royal Commission on the Glamorgan sites (RCAMW, Glam) that the importance of this type of monument has been realised. My own interest was aroused by my excavation of a barrow with a cairn ring strikingly similar to the ring-cairn 278 at Penmaenmawr (Lynch, 1971). It should be emphasised, however, that this present work is still in a very tentative and fluid stage. Although I have produced maps I would not guarantee that all the sites marked have been correctly identified and not all areas of the Principality have been covered with equal thoroughness. Information is good for the five North Welsh counties and for Glamorgan; for Montgomeryshire, Radnorshire, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire early Royal Commission inventories are available (RCAMW, 1911, 1913, 1917 and 1925); but for Breconshire, Cardiganshire and Monmouthshire comprehensive coverage is entirely lacking. In addition I must admit that I have visited only a small proportion of the 117 sites marked, and the possibilities of misinterpretation from descriptions by others of these easily misunderstood monuments are immense. Consequently I have not felt able to give a list of sites lest this enshrine too much inaccurate information.

Since these monuments have been very unsystematically recorded in the past their nomenclature has been very varied and personal. It is therefore particularly important to try to arrive at some generally agreed definitions by which the class as a whole may be divided from, on the one hand, stone circles and, on the other, barrows, and the variations within the group may be distinguished from one another. The distinction between a ring-cairn and a barrow is, of course, clear when the barrow is well-preserved. It is when the barrow has been thoroughly robbed that the possibility of confusion arises. The criterion of regularity, especially of the inner ring is perhaps the best guide to a ring-cairn, but it must be admitted that this is often a difficult decision, especially when dealing with old records, just as one may suspect that many of the small 'stone circles' of early antiquaries were cairn circles, kerb circles or complex-ring-cairns where the cairns or banks were grass-grown or not considered important enough to mention¹.

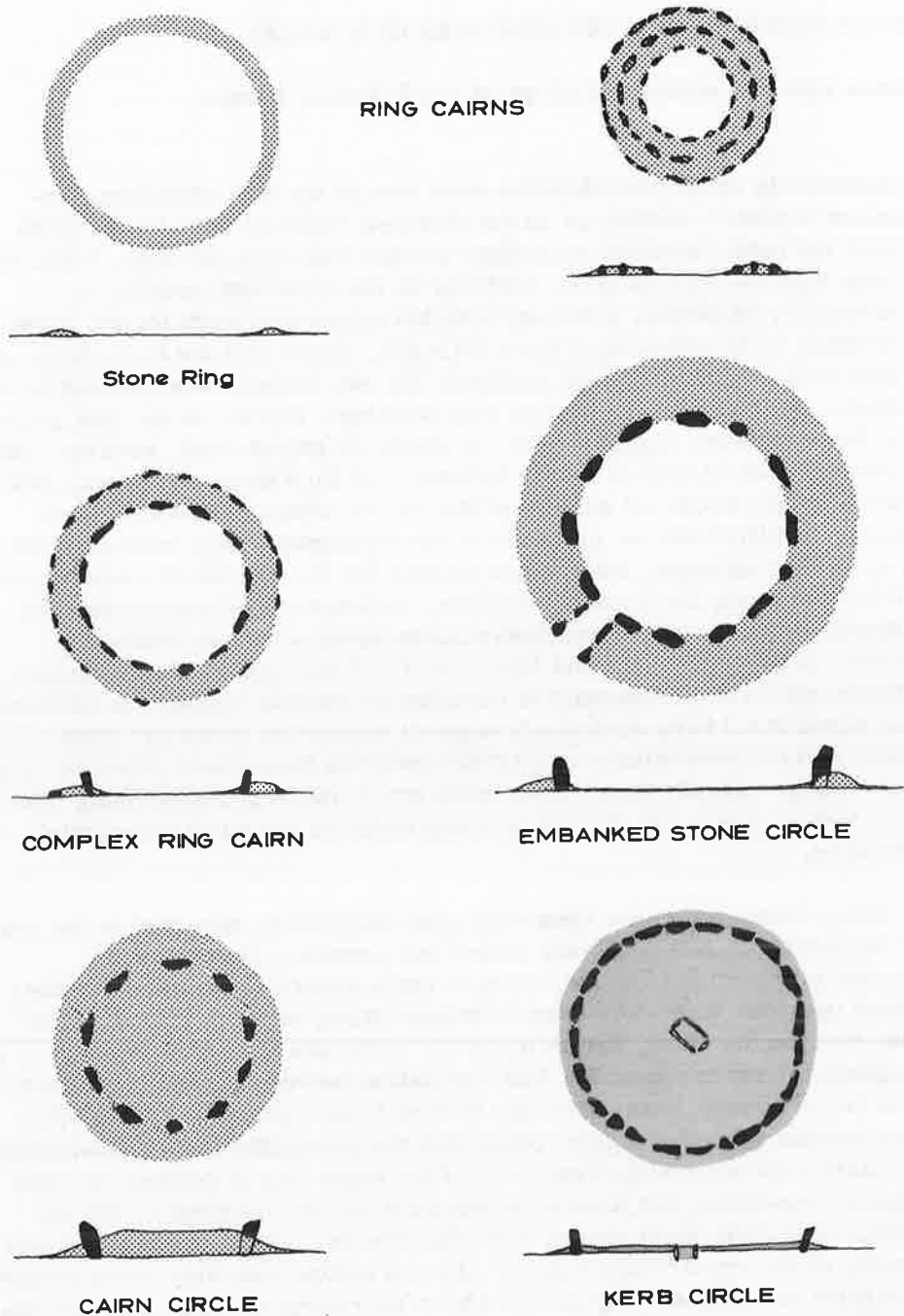


Figure 1. Ring-Cairns and related monuments: definition diagrams.

It is hoped that the series of definitions shown in diagrammatic and somewhat idealised form in Fig. 1 will prove acceptable and useful. The distinctions between the various ring-cairns and the cairn circle and kerb circle are relatively easy to define. The group of what I have called 'complex-ring-cairns' (and might be better called 'ring-cairn circles', if this does not add too many permutations on too few names) is the least satisfactory. They clearly lie somewhere between the kerbed ring-cairn and the embanked stone circle, but the boundaries of the class are difficult to set and may turn out to be meaningless. Excavation may eventually show a distinction of purpose, but these definitions are essentially designed to be used on unexcavated sites, as a guide for fieldworkers.

Ring-Cairn: a bank of stones surrounding a hollow central area. The bank may be kerbed with small uprights or laid boulders, or may be a simple spread of stones (these might be called 'stone rings'; the distinction may turn out to be significant for, in Wales, they tend to be much larger than the kerbed type). Several concentric rings of boulders or an entrance may be occasional features. Type sites: Penmaenmawr 278 (small, kerbed) and Cwm Cadlan III, Brecs. (large stone ring).

Complex-Ring-Cairn (?Ring-Cairn Circle): ring-cairn with conspicuous stones either on inside or outside edge of bank. Some may have a central mound. Type sites: Gelli Circle, Glam. and Hengwm 'Cairn Circle', Mer.

Embanked Stone Circle: very similar to the complex-ring-cairns. The distinction is basically a question of the size of the uprights. Entrances are normal in this type. Type site: Druid's Circle, Penmaenmawr.

Stone Circle: a ring of free-standing stones set in the ground without any bank. A few may have an isolated mound in the central area, and free-standing stone avenues and outliers may be associated. Type site: Gors Fawr, Pems.

Cairn Circle: low cairn from which spaced uprights emerge, more or less prominently and often leaning outwards. Important points are the obvious filling of the centre and the spacing of the uprights. Type sites: Bryn Cader Faner, Mer. and Glandy, Carm.

Kerb Circle: contiguous or very close-set ring of stones surrounding a level area. This central area will normally appear empty, but may in fact be filled with a shallow spread of stone. There may be a slight bank outside the ring, but it is the contiguity of the stones which distinguishes this type from the cairn circle. Some may have a large cist in the centre. Type sites: Moel Ty Uchaf, Mer. and Carn Llechart, Glam.

Cairn Ring: not an independent monument but a ring-cairn (or occasionally other types) found covered by a barrow. These are normally assumed to have been designed as part of the burial monument, but sometimes there is evidence for later conversion to burial use. There is also evidence for a

connection with stake circles. Type site: Bedd Branwen, Angl.

Henge: circular bank and ditch enclosure, normally without stones but occasionally enclosing a free-standing ring. They are rare in Wales and are outside the scope of this work, but they should not be entirely forgotten in the enquiry. Type site: Llandegai, Caerns.

In view of the general similarity of the ring-cairns and their relations, it is encouraging to see that the distinctions drawn above do hold good for the whole country. Cairn circles and kerb circles in both N and S are closely similar and equally distinguishable from local versions of the other sub-groups. One may therefore conclude that the builders had a particular pattern in mind, and that this type of monument fulfilled a purpose which could not be so appropriately fulfilled by the other versions of the ring.

The ring-cairns are far more numerous (including complex-ring-cairns they are 80 per cent of the total) and less distinctive, and it is within this group that regional variations may be expected. The work is not yet sufficiently advanced for any discussion of these variations to be in the least definitive, but certain differences which may turn out to have a regional bias can be pointed out. A conspicuous feature of the ring-cairns of Glamorgan is that many of them (19 per cent) have an entrance through the bank. Further N this feature is extremely rare, being found only at Aber Cwmddwr, Cards. (Hogg, forthcoming) and perhaps at Y Gyrn I, Mer. (Bowen and Gresham, 1967, 84-5). A complexity of design which is more common in the N than in the S is the duplication of concentric rings of boulders, some monuments having up to four. Since this feature is found in both E and W Merioneth and in Caernarvonshire it cannot be thought of as a very exclusive regional design. Nor is the predilection for leaning stones, seen in its most dramatic form at Bryn Cader Faner and at other sites in the Arduwy area of Merioneth, but also found in Glamorgan. Coastal Merioneth does, however, produce one kind of monument which is not, to my knowledge, found elsewhere; that is the low ring-cairn with a single tall stone set on one side (e.g. Cerrig y Cledd; Bowen and Gresham, 1967, 88, 92).

Ring-cairns and complex-ring-cairns with small mounds within the central area are a more difficult problem for, without excavation, it is impossible to tell whether this is a feature of the original design, or the result of later adaptation. In either case it would suggest an assimilation with the burial monuments, but it does not mean that all such sites should be considered principally as barrows, for central mounds may be found within stone circles without these circles being any less a ritual monument. Another variation on this theme is the ring-cairn with filled centre, not forming a mound or cairn,

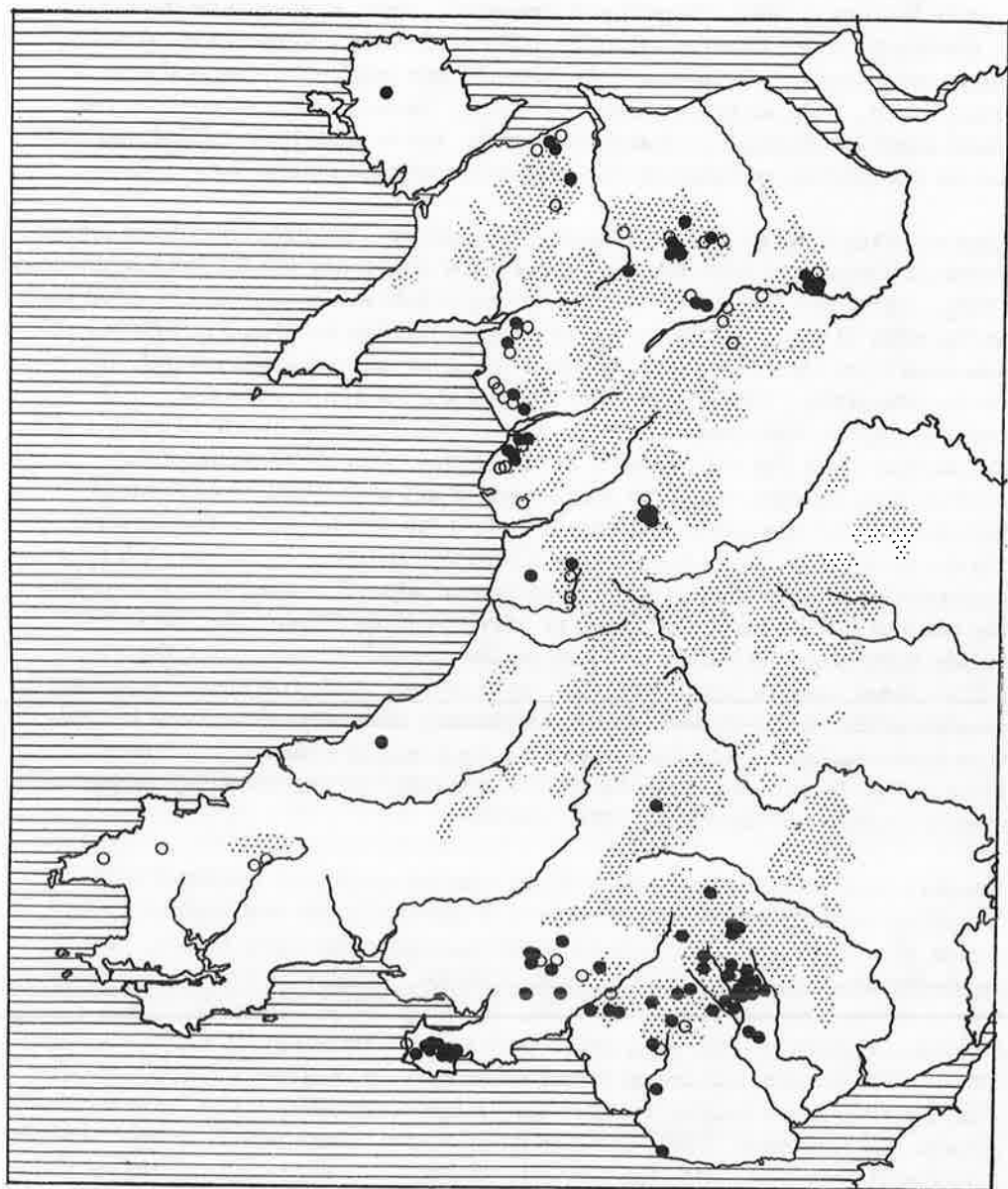


Figure 2. Distribution of Ring-Cairns in Wales. Simple Ring-Cairns ● and more complex varieties ○. Land over 1000 ft shaded.

but simply filled flush with the top of the ring. The clearest example of this type is Y Gyrn I, Mer. (Bowen and Gresham, 1967, 84-5) where the filling is obviously earth; another example is the well-known Pond Cairn, Glam., where only excavation revealed the original gap between filling and ring (Fox, 1937). Like so many other variations, these rings with mounds are found most frequently in coastal Merioneth, but it must be admitted that they can be confidently recognised only under exceptional conditions.

Like so many Bronze Age monuments ring-cairns are a feature of the upland areas of Wales, but this does not seem to be due to any desire for conspicuous siting. Cairn circles, kerb circles and embanked stone circles are often set on the edge of steep slopes or on the nose of a ridge but they are seldom conspicuous from more than one direction and ring-cairns seem actually to favour obscurity. The siting of the Druid's Circle and Circle 278, Penmaenmawr, are cases in point. The embanked stone circle is visible on the skyline from the valley below but is hidden from many parts of the surrounding plateau; while the ring-cairn is set in the bottom of a small hollow, entirely invisible until one is only a few yards away. The Druid's Circle stands just above the source of a small stream. A setting such as a high moorland plateau with the monuments clustered in the saddles or round the head of the descending stream is very common. Where they lie in the valley itself they may often be found on the second terrace above the river, while others may be sited neutrally, as it were, on narrow shelves on the mountainside. In Merioneth where prehistoric trackways have been traced with some success it can be shown that, in common with other forms of Bronze Age monument, the ring-cairns are often strung out along these routes (Bowen and Gresham, 1967, 56-63).

Another point of individual siting which may be worthy of comment is the frequency of pairing. This is a feature of several kinds of religious monuments of various dates. It may be found amongst megalithic tombs, notably of the Severn Cotswold group (a good example in Wales is Carneddau Hengwm, Mer.; Bowen and Gresham, 1967, Pl. II) and in henges (e.g. Llandegai, Caerns.; Houlder, 1968) and, more pertinently, among stone circles (Grimes, 1963, 106). Several instances of paired rings may be given, e.g. Cefn Caer Euni I and II; Moel Goedog I and II; the Hengwm Circles, all in Merioneth (Bowen and Gresham, 1967) and Trannon I and II, Mont. (E.H., 1868, 18-19). It is interesting that, with the possible exception of the Hengwm circles and of Trannon, the paired monuments belong to different groups; the Caer Euni sites are a kerb circle and a ring-cairn; the Moel Goedog ones are a stone circle and a ring-cairn, as are the Mynydd Epynt pair in Breconshire, although the ring-cairn was later converted into a barrow (Dunning, 1943).

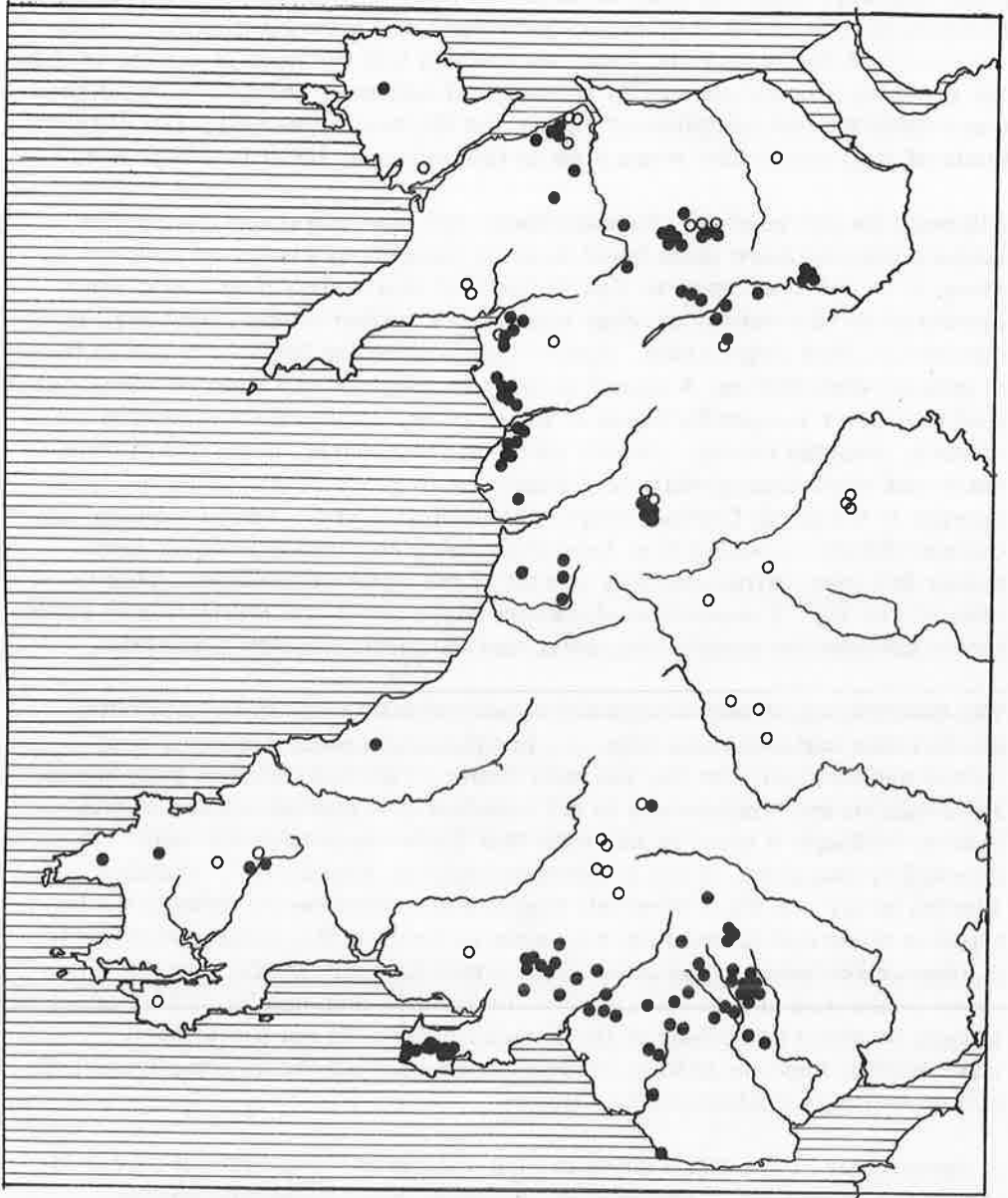


Figure 3. Distribution of Ring-Cairns ● and Stone Circles ○ .

Even excavation has seldom shown whether or not these pairs were strictly contemporary. There is some evidence to show that neither the Carneddau Hengwm (Lynch, 1969, 136-9) nor the henges at Llandegai (Houlder, 1968) were built at the same time. One may assume that the normal answer is that the grouping was not planned by the original builders, unless one could show some different and complementary use for the two monuments. The different kinds of ring-cairn offer some hope of this solution, but it is a faint one.

Although the paired rings are sufficiently common to warrant discussion, ring-cairns are more often found in more amorphous groups or clusters of sites. It is definitely rare to find an isolated ring-cairn; they are almost invariably in the vicinity of other monuments, either cairns, barrows, stone circles or other ring-cairns. This is true both on the local level and in terms of general distribution. A glance at the map (Fig. 2) will show that ring-cairns tend to cluster in specific areas of the country, notably the Glamorgan uplands, western Gower, coastal Merioneth (3 groups), north Caernarvonshire and south Denbighshire and Edeirnion (3 groups). Another group may emerge in the north Cardiganshire/Llanbrynmair area. Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, which have been reasonably thoroughly studied, have rather few ring-cairns and they are all of the more exotic kinds. This is unusual for Fig. 2 shows that elsewhere there is no real distinction in distribution between the simple ring-cairn and the more complex variations.

The distribution of ring-cairns and stone circles shows some interesting similarities and contrasts (Fig. 3). In Glamorgan there are many ring-cairns and no stone circles; the distribution of stone circles in Breconshire, Radnorshire and Montgomery is not matched by a similar spread of ring-cairns, although it must be admitted that these areas have not been thoroughly searched. In the N Caernarvonshire, Clocaenog², Ardudwy, Llanbrynmair and the E Presceli area the correspondence between the two types is close and in fact they may even be found in the paired relationship. A comparison between the stone circles and the more exotic types of ring-cairn (embanked stone circle, cairn circle, and kerb circle), which might be thought to share something of their visual appeal, is not particularly illuminating; they are neither closely linked, nor obviously complementary and so mutually exclusive (Fig. 4).

A comparison of the distribution of ring-cairns and barrows and cairns in Wales is perhaps more instructive. Locally, ring-cairns are almost invariably sited in areas where barrows are to be found but when the overall distribution is compared there are some striking *lacunae* (Fig. 5)³. It is obvious that thriving Bronze Age populations in Flintshire, central Denbigh-

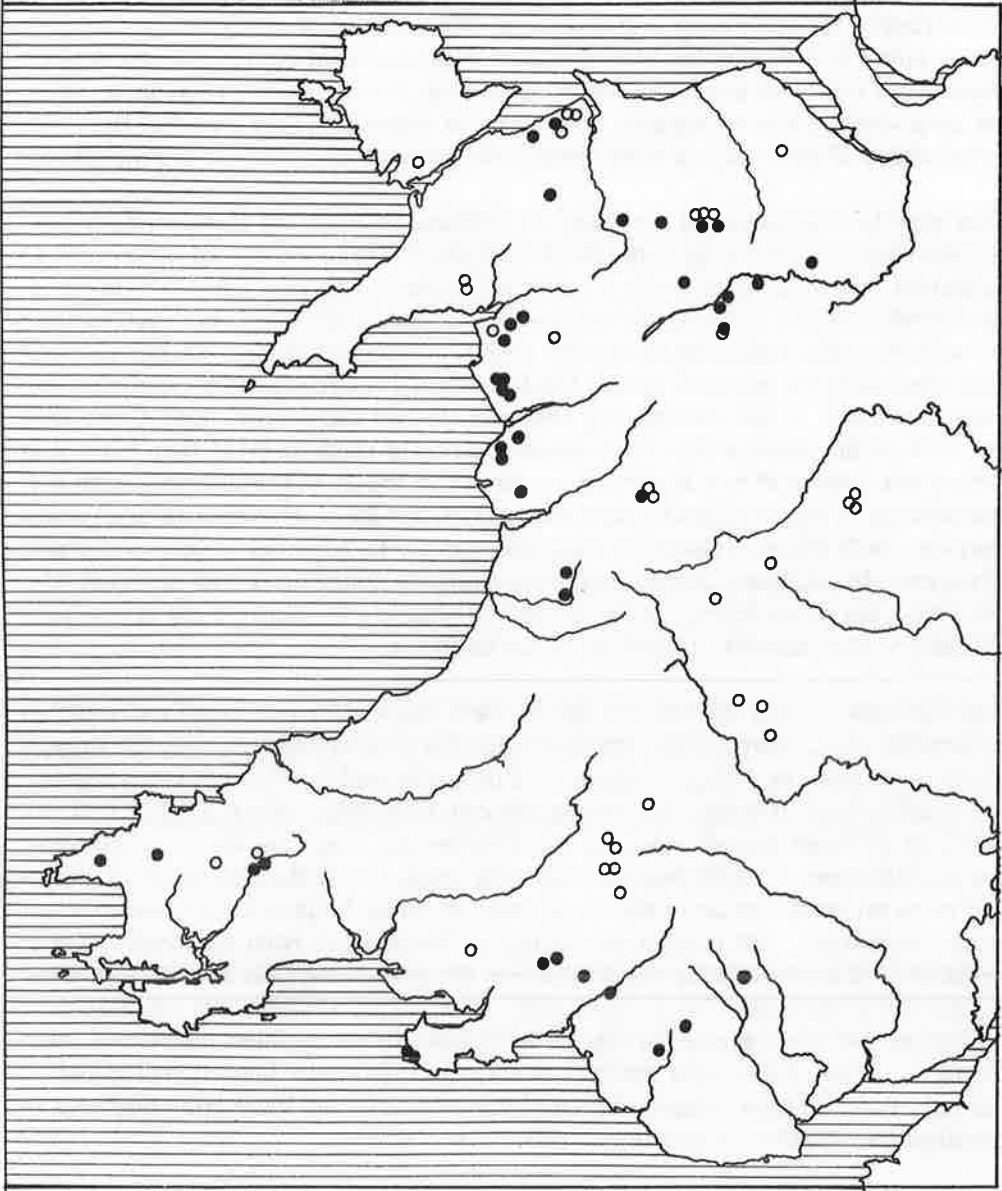


Figure 4. Distribution of more complex Ring-Cairns ● and Stone Circles ○

shire, S Pembrokeshire and the Vale of Glamorgan did not feel the need to build ring-cairns although some of them adopted the style, in the form of cairn rings, for their burial monuments. The disparity of distribution in Mid Wales and S Cardiganshire may be more apparent than real, because these areas have not been searched for ring-cairns. However, taken at face value, the map would seem to suggest that there is something more behind the distribution of ring-cairns than simply an optional variation of barrow design.

This may be a question of purpose, or perhaps of regional traditions. A regional bias is shown up quite clearly in those areas where we have sufficient information to make a count of barrows and ring-cairns⁴. In Merioneth where 113 barrows are known, 27 (23.9 per cent) are ring-cairns of various types. Glamorgan has the greatest number of ring-cairns (54) but they form only 14 per cent of the total number of barrows if one includes the Vale; however, if one counts only the uplands and the Gower, they form 29 per cent of the Bronze Age monuments there. In Denbighshire they form 8 per cent of the total and are restricted to areas in the S; in Caernarvonshire the percentage of ring-cairns to barrows is 3.6 and the restriction is even more obvious. In N Caernarvonshire they are almost 11 per cent of the total number of cairns. In Anglesey the one doubtful example constitutes 3.3 per cent of the total, but more telling is the complete absence of ring-cairns from the Flintshire plateau with its 140 or more barrows.

Some groups of ring-cairns are set on well-known lines of access across the mountains (e.g. Llangollen, the Berwyns and Llanbryn-mair), but the areas of frequent eastern influence such as Flintshire and the Vale of Glamorgan, are notably free of them. Unfortunately our knowledge of the pottery and artifacts of these upland areas is too deficient to allow one to probe far into the peculiarities of distribution from this angle. Both the problems of purpose and cultural tradition and origin can only be taken further by evidence derived from excavation. Not many ring-cairns in Wales have been excavated, but I propose to discuss briefly what evidence we have from this source. To date eight ring-cairns have been excavated but only five of them are entirely typical of the type, since the others have been filled or later converted into barrows. Five of the eight embanked stone circles have been investigated, but only two complex-ring-cairns and two kerb circles have been dug. No detailed information is available from cairn circles.

Banc Troed Rhiw Seiri, Cards. (Houlder, 1959) is a ditched ring-cairn with some indication of an outer bank. Structurally, therefore, it is rather unusual. In the centre was a very large shallow grave containing stones (perhaps piled round a wooden box or coffin originally), some unburnt bone

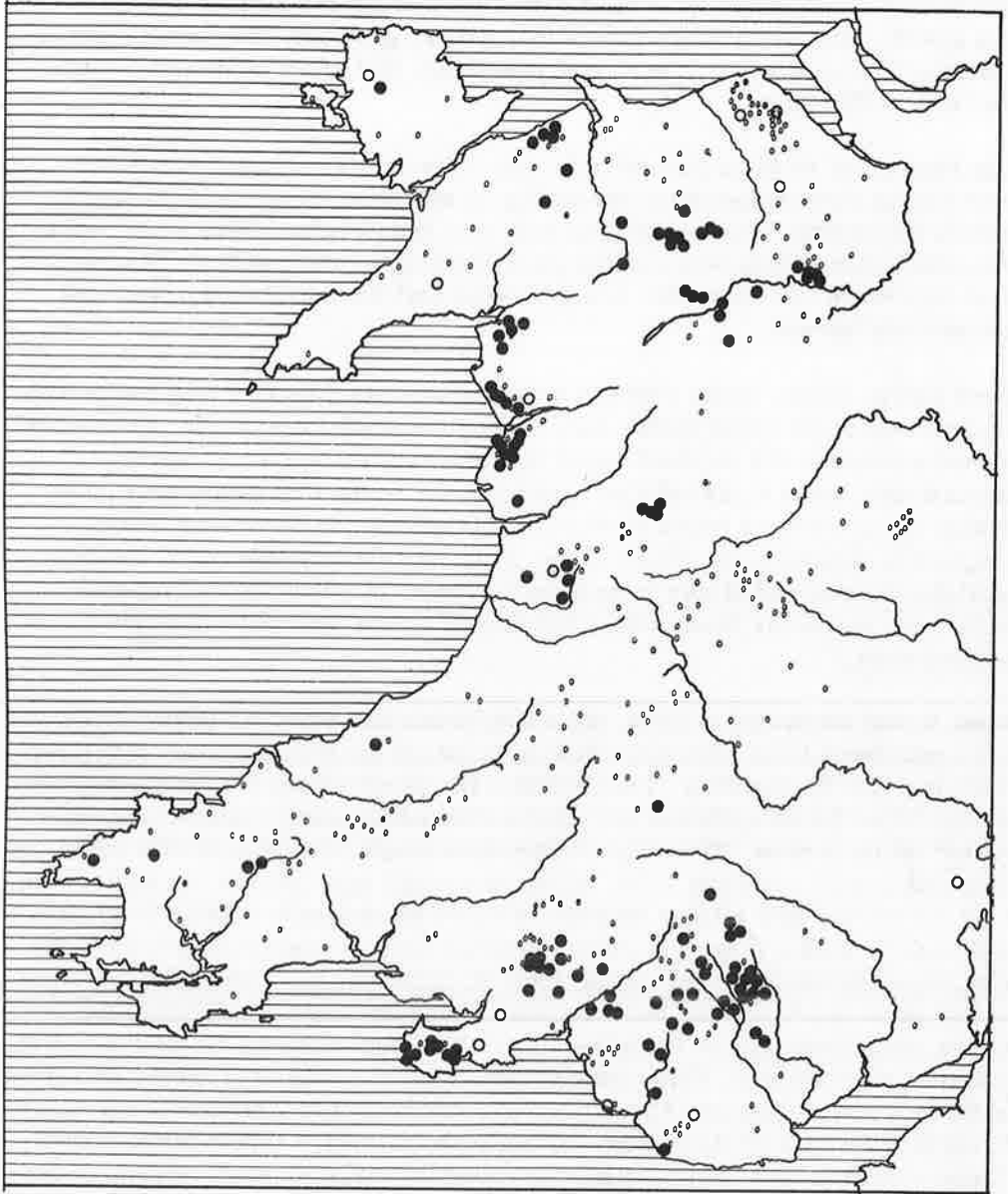


Figure 5. Distribution of Ring-Cairns ● , Cairn Rings ○ and Barrows ◦ , each circle represents five Barrows .

and sherds of what may be a Barbed Wire Beaker, together with two barbed and tanged arrowheads. At a later date a pit was cut through the filling of this grave. This pit contained charcoal, greasy grey ash and sherds from an undistinctive pygmy cup. There is a possibility that extra stone was added to the bank at this time.

The ring-cairn at Aber Cwmddwr is only a few miles away and is remarkable among north Welsh sites for having an entrance (Hogg, forthcoming). Within the central area the unburnt body of a headless child was found and at the centre itself there was a small pit containing a Collared Urn. This urn held only earth and charcoal. It would seem that the burial at this site was not entirely normal.

Pond Cairn, Glam. (Fox, 1937) is a well-known example of a ring-cairn with central mound (or filled centre as it appeared before excavation). The central mound consisted of a vertical-sided turf stack covering a small cairn. Beneath this was a Collared Urn containing the bones of a single adult, and beside the urn were a small rock-cut basin and pit. In these were more fragments of burnt bone, those in the pit being from a young child. At least until the Roman period this monument consisted of a bare stone ring with built inner and outer faces with a flat-topped mound isolated within the central area.

When it was excavated in 1940, the cairn beside the Ynys Hir stone circle was considered to be a barrow showing evidence for unusual ritual practices (Dunning, 1943). However, I believe that the peculiarities can be more easily explained as the delapidation of a ring-cairn subsequently covered and converted into a barrow. The original structure would have been a wide stone ring with a well-set outer kerb. Within the small open area in the centre was a pit containing only a token quantity of burnt human bone mixed with charcoal and covered with a large flat stone. This pit must be contemporary with the ring since the stones cover upcast from it. How long the monument remained in this state is not known, but it seems to have become very delapidated, losing many loose stones from the outer edge, but retaining the well-set kerb, before it was covered. This covering consisted of a mound of turves (the lines of turf are very clear and show that there has been no subsequent disturbance to explain the loss of stone from the ring) capped with a thin layer of stones. These stones form a neatly built edge round the circumference except on the NE where they have been removed to make room for a cremation burial in a small pit. The gap was closed by uprights a little outside the original edge of the mound. This burial was of a young person accompanied by a tiny undecorated pygmy cup, a flint knife and two biconical beads, one of anthracite

and the other pottery. This burial, which may be dated in general terms to EBA II, would seem to mark a third phase of activity at the monument. The primary pit, contemporary with the ring-cairn, is ambiguous; the token quantity of bone suggests a ritual deposit rather than a normal burial.

A similar interpretation could be applied to the monument on Penard Burch, near Swansea (Williams, 1945), but the evidence is less strong. The central area here had been badly disturbed, but the remains of a small cist were found, together with a quantity of charcoal, but no bone. The excavator assumed that all the cremated bone must have been removed previously, but this seems unlikely in view of the small size of the pieces, for scraps would surely remain. It is possible that this central feature was another ritual rather than burial deposit. Sherds from a Collared Urn (probably Secondary Series) may have come from this monument in the last century.

Circle 278 at Penmaenmawr (Griffiths, 1960) is perhaps the best example of an excavated ring-cairn. The stone ring is 1.2 m wide with an inner and outer kerb. Several of the kerb-stones on the inner edge are very large and the largest one (E) was found to be a natural boulder still *in situ*. Presumably the monument was designed around this stone and its pre-eminent position is emphasised by the hearth found at its foot and the cremation tucked in under its overhanging end. Directly opposite this stone, against the inner edge of the ring at the other side, was a pit containing a very small Collared Urn which held only burnt earth and charcoal. This urn was covered by a stone on which a fire had been lit. The centre was completely bare of features or finds, all the points of interest were around the inner edge of the ring and include, in addition to those already mentioned, an 'arm-chair-like' arrangement of stones interpreted as perhaps the setting for a wooden statue or totem. Charcoal from beneath the ring gave a radiocarbon date of 1405 \pm 155 BC (NPL 10) and material from the hearth against Stone E a date of 1520 \pm 145 BC (NPL 11) which agrees well with the archaeological dating for the urn (Uncorrected. Griffiths, 1962). The purpose of the monument is ambiguous; there is one burial (only a small quantity of bone) but several other features which are unconnected with burial.

A smaller ring-cairn, Cefn Caer Euni II, Mer., is at present being excavated. It is kerbed like Circle 278, but has four concentric rings. So far there has been no evidence of burial, but there is at least one charcoal-filled hole within the central area. A notable amount of quartz is incorporated in this monument. Another site which is perhaps best described as a ring-cairn is the 'mound' on Crug Du, Capel Cynon, Cards. (Davies; 1905). The excavation report is very unclear, but a stone ring 1.2 m - 1.5 m wide seems to have

surrounded an 'elevated saucer of rough ground'. Several urns and cists containing cremation burials were found either under the ring or within the central area. Since the photographs suggest that the central area was not dug, the former is more likely. A comparable situation may exist at Pebyll, and at Llanrhidian, Glam., where at least one cist can be seen in the thickness of the stone bank (RCAMW, Glam., nos. 348 and 209). The surviving pottery includes Collared Urns (probably Secondary Series) and pygmy cups but there is also a sherd of Beaker from an unrecorded position on the site (Savory, 1961, 53-5). This monument seems to have been designed specifically for burial and is very similar to a number of cairn rings which cover a series of burials (e.g. Bedd Branwen; Lynch, 1971, or Cefn Goleu, Bevan-Evans and Hayes, 1955). This type is the nearest thing in Wales to the Scottish enclosed cremation cemeteries, but the comparison is not especially close since in Scotland the rings enclose the burial area rather than covering or incorporating it as in Wales.

Several unexcavated ring-cairns have holes or hollows in the centre which might be interpreted as evidence for the former presence of a burial cist, but may more likely be the result of wishful thinking on the part of treasure-seekers. However there is one site near Merthyr Tudful, Twynbrynbychan (RCAMW, Glam., no. 385) which does provide genuine evidence for a very large cist, almost 2 m in length. This is in line with evidence from other types of ring-cairns; where cists exist, they are usually exceptionally large, suitable for an extended inhumation.

Only two complex-ring-cairns have been excavated; neither have produced very helpful results. The Hengwm Circle, Mer. (Crawford, 1920) which is very similar to Cefn Caer Euni II, but with more conspicuous, leaning stones, was excavated to subsoil in the centre, but nothing whatsoever was found. 'Burnt bones and flint flakes' are said to have been found in 'a circle of stones near Llanaber' (Evans, 1897, 279), but there is no evidence that this is the site referred to. The Gelli Circle on the moors above the Rhondda was excavated in 1901-6, but had already been badly disturbed (Griffith, 1906, 285-92). Unfortunately no drawings were published, but the written record is reasonably clear. Both the inner and outer edges of the ring were dry-built, and set flush with the inner face were a series of upright stones, about the same height as the bank and regularly spaced, about 1.2 m to 1.5 m apart. 'Cist-like' constructions were found against three of these stones and showed evidence of fire. They recall the 'arm-chair' feature and the hearths at Circle 278, Penmaenmawr. The SE sector had been damaged and evidence for an entrance there was uncertain. The central area was filled with only 0.2 m of earth and nothing was found at the central point. However there was

a stone cist (1.1 m by 0.84 m) dug into the surface 2 m from the inner edge of the ring on the SW side. This cist had been previously disturbed and nothing was found except dark earth. There was a good deal of charcoal on the surface, but no other finds. The cist could well have held a burial, but, as at Circle 278, there is evidence for other and perhaps more important activities on the site. The monument is in a slight hollow on a level ridge and is close to a cairn cemetery, a platform cairn and the site of a flat cist which contained a Developed Southern Beaker (RCAMW, Glam., no. 369). Another complex-ring-cairn with evidence of a central cist is Afon-y-Bedol, Caerns. (RCAMW, 1956, no. 560) where the exposed cist is 2.3 m long. The monument itself is small, being only 6.5 m in diameter. Others have modern holes, which may or may not be significant, while several in the north have a central mound (e.g. Llyn Eiddew Bach IV, Mer.).

A surprisingly large proportion of the embanked stone circles in Wales have been excavated but the paucity of finds makes dating or discussion difficult, although it does suggest a closer relationship with the simple stone circles which are invariably barren of features. The two Hengwm circles, S and T, were excavated in 1919 by Crawford (1920). All the visible stones had been removed by then, but Pennant's descriptions (1783, ii, 262) establish the classification, mentioning both large uprights and a stone bank at both sites, although stoneholes were not found at S. Both sites are unusual in having an external ditch and at T the stones must have been oddly set in the outer edge of the bank. Nothing was found in the centre of T; in S there was a shallow oblong depression 2.5 m long. It contained no bone, but with acid soil conditions it might reasonably be interpreted as a grave. There was a fire-pit nearby with a scatter of domestic Beaker sherds. Similar sherds came from a stonehole on circle T and provide an acceptable dating horizon for the monuments.

Meini Gwyr, Carms. was excavated just before the war by Grimes but unfortunately his records were destroyed (1963, 141-3). The monument is a very large one with a wide earth bank with tall stones set in the inner edge. There were originally 17 of these stones and the entrance passage on the W was lined with uprights. No features of any kind were found within the central area, but a pit containing charcoal lay just outside the entrance. Dating evidence was provided by Food Vessel sherds from a secondary hearth on top of the bank.

The embanked stone circle under the third barrow in the linear cemetery at Letterston, Pembs. was excavated by Savory (1964) who recognised the complex nature of the site. Unfortunately earlier disturbance made complete

certainty on some points impossible. The monument is quite a small one incorporating a great deal of quartz. The passage at the E had been badly disturbed but the unusual, high portal stones marking its inner edge remained. The central area was bare of features but had been covered by a 'pavement' of white quartz. This pavement was ragged and incomplete by the time the circle was filled and covered with the mound of turves. One stone had fallen and several were leaning towards the centre, and this suggests that the circle had existed in its own right for some length of time. A pit filled with charcoal was found outside the entrance just beyond the edge of the later mound. The only find was the disturbed remains of a cremation burial with a few sherds of what was probably a Collared Urn set between the portal stones in the passage. It is probable, but cannot be proved because of the disturbance, that this burial is secondary to the circle and may be the cause of its conversion to barrow form.

The Druid's Circle, Penmaenmawr, produced an uncharacteristically large number of finds (Griffiths, 1960). The structure is very typical of the class with a stone bank, an entrance passage on the SW and originally thirty tall stones around the inner edge. In the centre there was a group of burials. One, of a young child, was in an Enlarged Food Vessel inverted in a small, well-built cist whose large coverstone would have been visible on the original surface. Not far away was a small pit covered by a stone. This pit contained another Enlarged Food Vessel with a child cremation accompanied by a small bronze knife. A little further away was a second pit containing the remains of a third Enlarged Food Vessel without any trace of bone. Connected to this pit by a shallow trench was a depression lined with thirteen rather crude whetstones, on which lay the remains of a third cremation, too decayed for identification. As so often the interpretation of these burials is ambiguous, but the fact that both the identifiable ones are children suggests that they are in the nature of a foundation deposit for the circle, as the excavator was the first to recognise. Other circles, however, did not appear to need such consecration and they are, on present evidence, the group least closely associated with burials.

Kerb circles and cairn circles have received the least attention. Work is in progress at the kerb circle on Cefn Caer Euni, Mer. but final conclusions cannot yet be presented. Before excavation the site appeared as a ring of boulders surrounding a level central area without visible features. Excavation showed that the main components of the monument were the ring of boulders and the flat stone platform which they surrounded; the apparent bank outside the boulders was very variable and probably unimportant in the design. The platform was composed of a heavy basal layer of large stones, topped by

very dark soil and a spread of small flat stones. This platform covered a central feature, a shallow sub-rectangular ditch with deep D-shaped holes at either end. This surrounds a small rectangular platform (1.25 m by 0.75 m) of cleaned subsoil. There were no finds, though the size was adequate for a crouched inhumation, and any uprights associated with this feature had been removed before the stone platform was laid down. The area of the monument had been carefully prepared with a layer of clean yellow clay on which both the boulders of the ring and the central filling were set. This clean clay covered a dirty, charcoal-flecked surface with waste flint and scraps of pottery identifiable as from domestic Beakers. It is similar to the material found at the Hengwm circles and provides a terminus post quem for the site. Since it was necessary to cover a visibly dirty surface, the interval between settlement and kerb circle was presumably short.

The fine kerb circle, Carn Llechart, Glam. (RCAMW, Glam., no. 66) has a very large stone cist exposed at the centre. This was rifled at an unknown date and there is no record of its contents. Moel Ty Uchaf, Mer. (Bowen and Gresham, 1967, 80-2) has been disturbed at the centre but there is no evidence of a cist surviving. Similar indications of large cists are the only evidence available from cairn circles. At Rhydyglafais I, Mer. (Bowen and Gresham, 1967, 80) and at Carnedd y Saeson, Caerns. (RCAMW, 1956, no. 67.i.) remains of cists measuring 2 m in length survive. These cists seem unusually large and suggest perhaps extended burials and even special personages, but, in view of the size of normal burial shafts containing Beaker burials in Yorkshire this assumption may be unwarranted. It does, however, suggest a Beaker date and background for the monuments which accords well with the slightly more definite evidence from Cefn Caer Euni I.

Reviewing the evidence obtained from excavation one has to admit that a good deal of ambiguity remains on the question of purpose. At one end of the scale, no stone circle (without central mound) has produced evidence of burial so the monuments must be considered 'ritual' in the same way as henges are presumed to be primarily religious monuments. Closest to the stone circle lie the embanked stone circles where the connection with burials (Letterston and Druid's Circle) is such that the monument may be assumed to be more important than the person buried. The evidence from kerb circles and cairn circles is as yet very small. The presence of cists would suggest that they are primarily burial monuments, but the care with which the surface was prepared at Cefn Caer Euni I and the unusual platform burial (if such it was) imply a special ritual for these sites. The ring-cairns and the complex-ring-cairns provide genuinely conflicting information. Aber Cwmddwr and Circle 278 are surely ritual monuments; Capel Cynon and Pebyll are almost certainly

burial monuments. The conversion of one to the other, as seen at Ynys Hir and perhaps Penard Burch, confirms this ambiguity, as does their close similarity to cairn rings designed as an integral part of barrows.

Problems of dating are potentially more amenable to archaeological answers. Simple stone circles in Wales have produced no evidence of any kind on this question. Henges have shown a connection with the axe trade (Llandegai A; Houlder, 1968); they had made an appearance before the final waning of the megalithic tomb-building tradition (Bryn Celli Ddu; Lynch, 1969, 111-12) and have been associated with the later versions of Beaker pottery (Llandegai B; Houlder, 1968). The embanked stone circles at Hengwm, Mer. are associated with domestic Beaker pottery, but at Penmaenmawr the association is with Enlarged Food Vessels and a bronze knife, suggesting a continuation of the type into the full Early Bronze Age. Similarly the kerb circle and cairn circle may originate in the seventeenth century BC (traditional dating) and probably continue into the fifteenth or fourteenth. Ring-cairns were also built throughout this period and their span is epitomised by the monument at Banc Rhiw Troed Seiri, Cards., where the original Beaker grave was disturbed for the insertion of a pygmy cup accompanied by charcoal, but probably not by a burial. The association of ring-cairns with Collared Urns and Pygmy Cups (Circle 278 and Capel Cynon) accords well with the fourteenth century BC date for cairn rings in Wales, which, moreover, show evidence for contact with Wessex II in England. Odd and roughly circular arrangements of stone beneath Beaker barrows in Wales (e.g. Porth Dafarch, Angl.; Lynch, 1970, 94; Aberffraw, Angl.; Houlder, 1957; Twyn Bryn Glas, Brecs.; Webley, 1962) may indicate that the concept of the cairn ring (though not its close similarity to the ring-cairn) goes back to the Beaker period here, as elsewhere (e.g. Overton Down; Smith and Simpson, 1966). Inevitably at this stage in the work these conclusions must not be considered final, but I suspect that the monuments at present excavated will turn out to be fairly typical of the group, and its sub-groups, particularly as far as dating is concerned. The problems of use and purpose may defy even the most tenacious efforts at interpretation.

Footnotes

1. Although the importance of the cairn in the distinction between ritual and sepulchral monument was realised by such men as the Rev E.L. Barnwell; Archaeol Cambrensis, 3rd ser, V (1859), 347.
2. Capel Hiraethog III and circles on Y Foel Frech (Davies, E., 1929, 101

- and 103) have been added to Grimes's list (1963).
3. I am grateful to Professor Atkinson for allowing me to use his map (Lynch and Burgess, 1972, 111, fig. 1). Each dot represents 5 barrows within a 10 km square, therefore isolated or widely scattered groups are not shown.
 4. Caernarvonshire, RCAMW, 1956, 1960 and 1964; Denbighshire, Davies, E., 1929; Flintshire, Davies, E., 1949; Merioneth, Bowen and Gresham, 1967; Anglesey, Lynch, 1970; Glamorgan, RCAMW, forthcoming.

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