

## Sacred Landscapes

The profusion and variety of ceremonial monuments across Cornwall dating from the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods, conveys a picture of a society where religion and ritual was a major part of everyday life, fundamental to the way in which people perceived their world. The distribution of the monuments suggests that there may have been special sacred areas associated with ritual or ceremonial activities.

In this early period the population would have been highly scattered across large areas and people may have been on the move with grazing cattle for much of the year. It would have been important for this highly dispersed community to come together periodically in the long-established sacred landscapes where their ancestors were buried.

The 'houses of the dead' and other ritual monuments were permanently fixed in the landscape in contrast to the insubstantial houses of the living of which few traces remain. These monuments were carefully placed in the landscape suggesting that aside from their religious purpose they provided coherence, identity and a sense of belonging to the communities that built them. In upland areas such as Bodmin Moor and West Penwith where monument survival is good, the ways in which the stone circles and rows, menhirs, and burial mounds relate to each other and to the landscape can be examined.



*Zennor Quoit, Zennor. This is one of the more complex chambered tombs; it had one end closed by a large stone, while the other has a façade and antechamber. Photo © English Heritage. NMR. 18469/10*

## West Penwith

The quoits at Zennor, Mulfra, Chun and Sperris, whilst inconspicuously positioned in their immediate landscapes, are carefully located so that the summit tors of Carn Galva come into view on the horizon as each quoit is approached. This suggests that the hill was significant to quoit builders and it is possible to visualise a large area

of northern West Penwith as a sacred landscape in which the tor of Carn Galva was the centre point, perhaps in reverence to the ancestors who built the Neolithic tor enclosure on its summit.

The stone circle at Boskednan known as the Nine Maidens is just one of a group of monuments which includes barrows, cairns and standing stones, carefully placed in a line leading towards this distinctive hill. These monuments appear to have formed part of a processional way which passed through the circle itself before climbing towards the Neolithic tor enclosure on Carn Galva. When one stands in the centre of the circle, a view of the tor's peak is framed by two tall stones on the circle's northern side. These stones may have been used as a portal through which ritual processions passed.

These monuments lie in close proximity to a number of other important ritual sites including the standing stones at Men-an-Tol (which may have formed part of another stone circle) and, further afield, the quoits of Lanyon and West Lanyon. This whole area may therefore be seen in terms of a single prehistoric ceremonial landscape covering a large portion of the West Penwith Peninsula.



*The Nine Maidens stone circle in the foreground looking towards Carn Galva, the site of a Neolithic tor enclosure. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Bodmin Moor**

The ways in which people moved within and between significant places (both natural and man-made) in the landscape were an important aspect in the design of ceremonial landscapes. The use of cursus monuments as formalised processional ways is an obvious example of this. Two enigmatic features recently identified on Bodmin Moor may have served a similar function to cursuses. These are known as embanked avenues and they consist of two parallel banks of stone, in one case (at Showery Tor) four metres apart, and in the other (on Craddock Moor) eight metres apart, 60 metres and 87 metres long respectively.

The embanked avenue on Craddock Moor is aligned perfectly so that a line projected from it runs through the centre of a stone circle on Craddock Moor before bisecting

the middle of the three stone circles of The Hurlers. This appears to be the line of a processional way running at right angles to a second ritual pathway, also focused on The Hurlers, which ran along the main axis of the three circles towards the Neolithic enclosure on Stowe's Hill.

Another example of Bronze Age landscape design can be seen at the Stripple Stones. Here a stone circle is set within the bank of a henge. The henge entrance is so placed as to allow a clear line of sight to the Trippets stone circle to those looking out from within it. Both the Stripple Stones and Trippets stone circle have the summit of Roughtor as the principle skyline feature; anyone walking to the henge from the Trippets would quickly lose site of Roughtor as they passed to the south of Hawk's Tor. Roughtor would remain invisible until the centre stone in the henge was reached when it would once again dominate the northern horizon.



*The Trippets Stones, Blisland. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Roughtor was the focus of many ritual and ceremonial monuments, all forming part of what can be seen as a ritual landscape. One of the most recently recognised elements of this landscape is a massive earth and stone linear bank which runs for 400 metres up the northwest slopes of the tor. The first part of the bank runs southwest in a straight line and points towards the huge cairn on Showery Tor which dominates the sky line. The monument then turns sharply, realigning itself with the natural outcrop of Little Roughtor. This tor, also embellished with a cairn, lies at the northern end of the Neolithic tor enclosure which would have been an important focal point for the prehistoric community. The bank was until recently considered to be a later prehistoric boundary bank but is now believed to have been an important element in this designed ritual landscape. It was probably used as a ceremonial processional way rising to the tor enclosure and linking features of ritual significance within that landscape.