



MAP ILLUSTRATING LOCATION OF NEOLITHIC STONE REMAINS IN NORTHERN HONSHU, INCLUDING SOME NOW DESTROYED.

## THE STONE CIRCLES OF OYU

By J. EDWARD KIDDER, JR.

HAVING BEEN BORN in China (1922) and spent more than half his life in the Far East, the author is well acquainted with that area. He received the Ph.D. degree from New York University in 1955. From 1950 to 1956 Dr. Kidder taught at Washington University, St. Louis; since then he has been Associate Professor at International Christian University, near Tokyo. He is the author of *The Jomon Pottery of Japan, Ancient Japan* (in press) and other books. At present Dr. Kidder is conducting excavations in a large Middle Neolithic dwelling site on the university campus; a number of years will be required to complete the project.

OVERCROWDED CONDITIONS in Japan have usually been regarded as a modern phenomenon created by increasing industrialization during the past hundred years. This is undoubtedly true in part, but the great profusion of Neolithic sites, numbering tens of thousands, is graphic testimony of a country teeming with life, which even at that time might be described as bordering on a state of overpopulation. In later times greater demands were made on the land for agricultural needs, and it is safe to assume that many Neolithic monuments fell victim to this pressure. Not the least among these must have been the circles of standing stones that have become of special interest to archaeologists in the last fifteen years. In 1911 N. C. Munro said that he knew of no cromlech, or stone circle, outside of Hokkaido, the northernmost island (*Prehistoric Japan*, page 636). Since then research has uncovered more of these circles, not only on Hokkaido but in northern Honshu as well. In the latter area over thirty stone circles have been recorded, some still intact, others, such as the one which stood in the way of lengthening an air strip in Aomori prefecture, now destroyed.

The most common grouping, and the one most frequently seen in Hokkaido, is the simple circle composed of a dozen or more upright stones, three feet or so in height, rough and unhewn or sometimes smooth river rock, usually dragged in from a relatively short distance. Such circles are easily destroyed, but where most of the land is not under cultivation, as in Hokkaido, earth deposits and vegetation growths have combined to safeguard them.

By far the most spectacular and complex formations are those at Oyu in Akita prefecture, northern Honshu. The Oyu remains were first noticed in 1931, but since they were hidden under two to three feet of soil their extent was far greater than was imagined. An investigation in 1941 revealed that they covered a considerable area and would need rather large-scale and systematic excavation. This work was carried out in 1951-52 and the results handsomely published in 1953 by the Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties under

the title, *The Stone Remains of Oyu*. (The book contains a six-page English summary.)

Oyu is a small hot-spring town, undistinguished in every way, from which one may take the road to Hanawa up a steep hill and across a cultivated plain for a distance of approximately three miles. Here one finds two sets of stone circles, one on either side of the road, about eighty yards apart. These have received the names of the microscopic communities nearby, Manza for the northern one, Nonakado for the one to the south. The stones were brought from the bed of the Oyu River, which at its nearest point is only a few hundred yards away.

The Nonakado and Manza circles are roughly the same size, though the irregularity of the remains makes measurements only approximate. The outer circle of the former measures about 135 feet in diameter, the inner circle thirty-five; Manza is a little larger, the diameter of the outer circle being some 150 feet, of the smaller nearly forty-seven. Even though man and nature have combined to destroy many of the formations, in numerous cases the groups of stones within the outlines of the circles are still intact in patterns more or less oblong or circular, in some instances with one or more standing stones. At times the horizontally laid stones outline a pit below, or the uprights disposed at four or more points are connected by horizontals, as if marking graves. Presumably the hundreds of loose stones in haphazard positions may also have formed part of recognizable patterns. The Oyu double circles have a feature that is without doubt of considerable significance inasmuch as its relative position is the same in both sets of circles: a sun-dial construction stands apart from the rings, at Nonakado quite isolated, at Manza more nearly within the outlines of the outer ring. Each is located in the northwestern sector of the circle, Nonakado at 302°, Manza at 296°. A difference of six degrees does not alter the apparent calendrical significance of the arrangement.

The published report on the excavation is the work of a number of noted scholars who express quite divergent opinions on the use and meaning of the circles. Komai

considers the pits below the stones to be graves of the "stone-circle-tomb" variety known in Europe and ultimately appearing in the Far East; Oba places the emphasis on stone worship, popular since ancient times in Japan, and believes that the cult is indigenous. He thus minimizes the tomb idea. Shallow pits found below the grouped stones are mostly elliptical in shape and large enough to receive a body placed in the flexed position, the usual arrangement for Neolithic burials in Japan. Human remains of the Neolithic period are extremely rare, although some are found in shell mounds. It is not surprising that none appear at Oyu, for the soil of Japan has always been too humid to preserve its dead. Although excavation did not prove that they were graves, tests on seven of the fourteen pits dug indicated in one case a greater amount of phosphorus in the pit area than in the surrounding soil, which may imply that bones were once present.

Other possibilities come to mind as explanations of these shallow pits. They might have had a ritual use, but these would be completely isolated and unprecedented examples; or the sun-dials set apart from the circles could have been graves of chiefs, a possibility which might require further exploration, but the fixed position of the off-center groups attests to other purposes. Investigation has as yet revealed no indication of widespread agriculture at this time—a period which precedes the introduction of rice—so the possible solar significance may have to be considered apart from planting and harvesting rites.

The pottery found in the vicinity of the circles may be dated to Late Jomon (Neolithic) times, or, in this case, probably somewhere between 1500 and 1000 B.C. Remains from Middle Jomon stages already indicate communities of sometimes as many as thirty dwellings, but these stone circles are the strongest indication of cooperative enterprises undertaken in the Neolithic period.

The mythological literature of ancient Japan contains passages that shed light on the ideas that may have inspired these monuments. The Age of the Gods as ex-

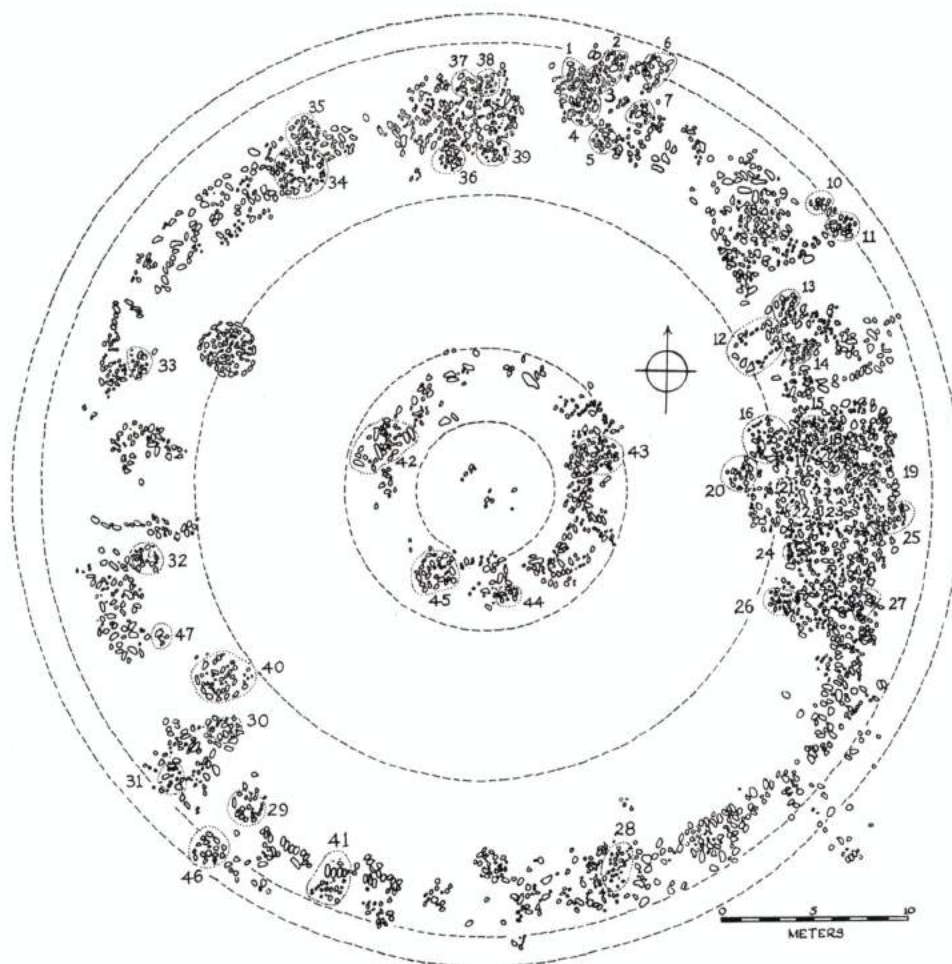
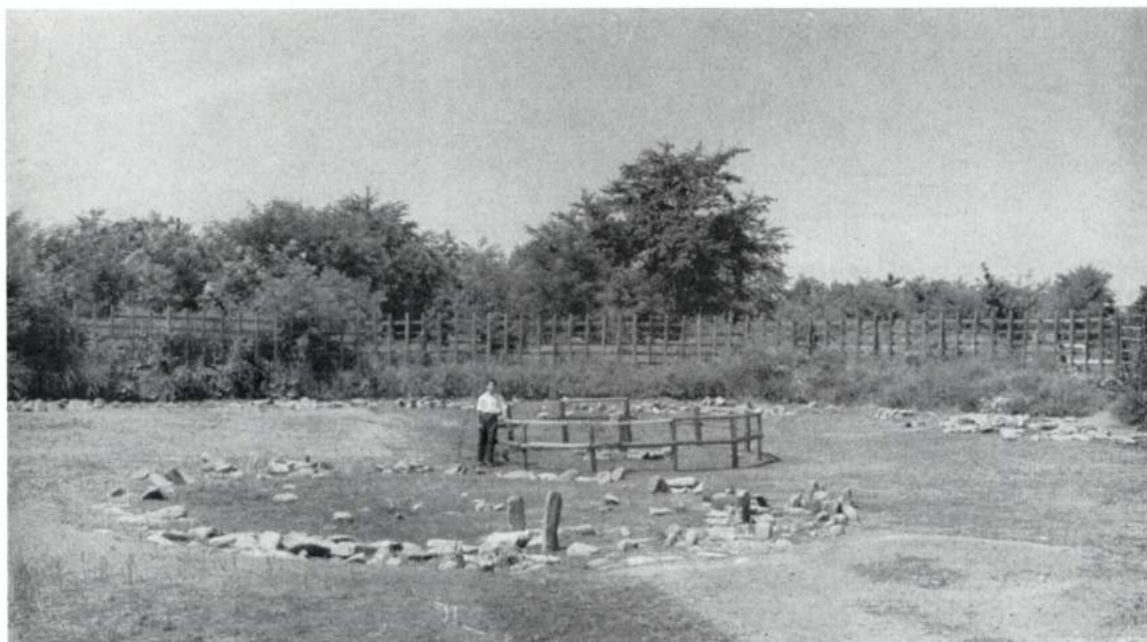


Diagram of the Manza circles, showing the concentric rings and forty-seven identifiable groups of stones. Excavations were carried out at groups 3, 12, 20, 21, 22, 24, 38, 40 and 46. From Goto and Yawata, *The Stone Remains of Oyu*, plate 4.



Stones laid in a rectangle to outline a pit (No. 12 in Manza outer circle). This pit would easily accommodate a body lying in contracted position. After excavation the pits were filled in and the stones carefully replaced.

## CIRCLES OF OYU continued



The Nonakado circles, view from the southeast. The inner ring, beyond it the "sun-dial" in a fenced enclosure, and some of the remains of the outer circle. There were thirty-three identifiable groups of stones, and areas under five of these were excavated. The fence in the distance shows the present level of the plain.

pounded in the *Kojiki* ("Records of Ancient Matters") and *Nihon-shoki*, or *Nibongi* ("Chronicles of Japan")—both the results of centuries of oral transmissions that were finally committed to writing in the eighth century A.D.—is a description with endless variations, showing much Chinese influence, of the events that caused the world to take on definite form, the gods to materialize, the islands to be created, and the land to be populated by divine beings. While the stories are told in contemporary terms, with frequent references to metal objects such as swords and bronze mirrors, the episodes recounted are obviously considered to be of extreme antiquity and must have occurred during the Stone

Age. Both of these books, it should be added, were designed to assert the superiority of one or more groups over others in early Japan, and to represent divine approval and guidance for the chosen tribes. The union of Heaven and Earth produced a reed shoot, the first fixed and stable object, from which was to spring the vast host of gods and goddesses, the loose aggregate that later came to be known as Shinto. The spontaneous action of Heaven, the male principle, engendered more gods, and in the seventh generation came Izanagi and Izanami, the Male-Who-Invites and the Female-Who-Invites, the mischievous pair who did more than all others to perpetuate the kingdom of gods on earth.



Stones in the Nonakado inner circle which may be remains of sun-dial formations. The tallest stone is about 2 feet 4 inches in height. On the right may be seen a group of stones, six of them standing, which possibly form the outline for a grave.



The isolated sun-dial of the Nonakado site, which is unusually well preserved. The upright stone in the center stands approximately 3 feet 2 inches high.

## **CIRCLES OF OYU** continued



The Manza sun-dial, which is placed slightly apart from the outer circle, as indicated in the diagram.

## CIRCLES OF OYU continued

Izanagi and Izanami produced the eight islands of Japan. In order to propagate islands and to give birth to the land, the couple descended to a small island called Onogoro—probably one near Awaji, not far from present-day Osaka. As it was considered to be the center of the land, there the pillar of Heaven was set up. Izanami circled the pillar from the left, Izanagi from the right, the goddess speaking first, "How pretty! a lovely youth!" Izanagi replied, "How pretty! a lovely maiden!" (W. G. Aston's translation of *Nihongi*, [1895] 15).

The first two offspring of this match were unsatisfactory, and so the pair returned to Heaven where the supreme court divined that two errors had been committed and rectification would be required before progress in augmenting the Japanese landscape could be made. The story at this point only thinly disguises the religious background for the claims made for divine approval of a patriarchal system. The maypole chase had to be repeated, but this time Izanagi moved to his left, skirting the pillar clockwise; Izanami danced from the other direction, and it was Izanagi who spoke first. The left side takes priority—a Chinese idea—and the woman waits to be addressed.

The complex interweaving of Chinese mythology in the Japanese legends testifies to the degree of borrowing from the mainland, yet in unraveling the fabric to remove the Chinese stories, one finds that the Sun Goddess theme is strikingly secure, possibly even reflecting ideas current in Japan when the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* people arrived. If the stone circles such as those of Oyu relate to such myths and embody elements of both stone and sun worship, the next phase of the epic is illuminating, for it records the beginning of the solar legend. Gods were yet to be created to rule the Earth which was now being inhabited by evil gods (i.e., hostile tribes). Only the *Nihongi* can impart the richness of the story:

"After this Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto consulted together, saying, 'We have now produced the Great-eight-island country. . . . Why should we not produce someone who shall be lord of the universe?' They then together produced the Sun-Goddess. . . . The resplendent lustre of the child shone throughout all the six quarters. Therefore the two Deities rejoiced,

saying, 'We have had many children, but none of them has been equal to this wondrous infant. She ought not to be kept long in this land, but we ought of our own accord to send her at once to Heaven, and entrust to her the affairs of Heaven' . . . and therefore they sent her up to Heaven by the ladder of Heaven."

Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, was followed by the Moon God, the ruler of the night, and by Susano-o, the Storm God. After several unsuccessful attempts by others, the August Grandchild of Amaterasu was sent down to conquer Japan for the virtuous gods. The thread loses its clarity at this point, but it seems that a near descendant, perhaps a grandson of this deity, emerges from the obscurity of common immortality and effectively destroys his opponents during a reign of more than one hundred years. The ancient accounts call him Kamu-yamato-iharebiko and give him the dates of 711 to about 585 B.C.; a thousand years later history tagged him as Jimmu Tenno, the first emperor of Japan, a ruler who was probably the contemporary of Augustus.

Before the introduction of Buddhism, Japanese religious thought had not separated the gods into a real hierarchy, and all fell into the classification of *kami*, a term translatable as "spirit." The gods were only vague conceptions, and were never portrayed in any recognizable way in prehistoric or protohistoric art. The worship of rocks, springs, trees, mountains and other natural objects must have caused the worshiper to travel to a set location but, later, enclosures outlined by stones or tree branches brought the spirits nearer home. Sun worship probably assumed greater meaning in Late Jomon times, when the solar myth was being elaborated. Evidence of stone worship and phallicism is obvious at Middle Neolithic sites, and the cult of the female figurine reached a mature stage at the time the Oyu circles were formed.

In the attempt to provide some interpretation of the stone circles by drawing upon the ancient legends, many questions still go unanswered, but the suggestion may be made that the isolated sun-dials symbolize the maypole for a ritual wedding dance such as that recorded in the Izanagi and Izanami story. Other interpretations will be forthcoming, but at Oyu the total archaeological evidence gives a primary claim to the Neolithic origins of these myths as related in the *Kojiki* and *Nihonsboki*.