

A note on the diameters of carved stone balls

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Despite their aesthetic value (Macdonald 2000, 10–11) and their mathematical interest (Sutton 2001, 20–1), the function of carved stone balls is unclear. A large subset of these balls is characterized by a diameter of ‘about 70mm’ (Marshall 1979, 40). This tendency towards a standard diameter can be considered in terms of the megalithic yard. Taking 70mm as our measure, the diameter of one carved stone ball approximates to one-twelfth of a megalithic yard. If we take the measure of the megalithic yard to be 2.72ft (Thom 1962, 246; see also Thom 1955), which approximates to 829mm, one-twelfth of this is just short of 69.1mm. Note also that one-twelfth of a megalithic yard is also 3.33 (recurring) megalithic inches (taking Thom’s measure of 40 megalithic inches in a megalithic yard; Thom 1969, 77). These observations, if borne out by measurement, relate carved stone balls to the dimensions of both stone circles and cup-and-ring marks.

Thus Marshall’s figure of ‘about 70mm’ should, perhaps, be adjusted by less than a

millimetre, to ‘about 69.1mm’. If 69.1mm does turn out to be a more accurate figure for the average diameter of this class of carved stone balls, the case is strengthened for these balls functioning as, or in relation to, standards of measurement.

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