

Stone Circles of Senegambia

Strengthening the Bond between Worlds

Built: 300 BCE–1600 CE,
Senegal and Gambia

The early societies of this West African region did not see death as a final state but rather as a passage into the ancestral realm.



To step into the enigmatic stone circles of Senegambia is to cross the threshold between the physical and spiritual worlds. Over 1,000 of these monuments are scattered across 93 sites in the expansive borderlands between present-day Senegal and Gambia in West Africa. Today, scholars agree that these circles served as ceremonial burial grounds—powerful symbols for the living that reveal an extraordinary reverence for the dead.

For centuries, the deceased were interred here in carefully prepared graves, often in excavated pits or stone chambers beneath the circles. Some graves contain evidence of double or even multiple burials, suggesting that these resting places might have served whole families and communities. Particularly striking is the practice of secondary burial, where remains were ceremonially reburied after a period—archaeological findings of scattered and subsequently reassembled skeletal remains support this interpretation. The graves themselves were often richly adorned. Pottery, sometimes delicately crafted, and jewelry made from iron, copper, or even rare or imported materials accompanied the deceased. These grave goods likely symbolized not only the social status of the departed but also equipped them with the items they might need on their journey, easing their transition to the afterlife.

Central to these burial traditions was the belief that death is not an abrupt end but a transition to a new state. The societies of this region viewed death as a multi-phase process through which the deceased gradually entered the ancestral world. This began with physical burial, typically soon after death, followed by grand funeral ceremonies that marked the final integration of the deceased into the community of ancestors. Between these stages, ritual acts often took place to honor the spirit of the departed, maintain the person's connection with the living world, and to protect the community. Ceremonial dances, animal sacrifices, and offerings of food and other gifts to the dead played a vital role in these traditions. These rituals not only preserved the memory of the departed but also strengthened the bond between the earthly and spiritual realms.

Thus, the stone circles of Senegambia bear witness to both an unseen ancestral world, and a worldview that regarded death as part of a much larger journey—a journey in which the living community played an indispensable role.