

# Enclosing the Neolithic

Recent studies in Britain and Europe

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# Living with Sacred Spaces: The Henge Monuments of Wessex

*Joshua Pollard*

## Abstract

By asking why henge monuments might be constructed in the first place, and in the locations where they were, we might better be able to understand their form and purpose. Here the matter is approached at two scales: first at a macro level by asking why the Wessex region should have become such a focus for monument construction during the first three quarters of the 3rd millennium BC. The second is more specific and seeks to understand the local conditions in which places might be transformed and become sufficiently sanctified to require monumentalisation. It is argued that places and their properties, powers and politics all played their part.

**Keywords:** Wessex, henge, settlement, monumentalisation, sacredness

The sheer concentration and often immense scale of the later Neolithic (*c.*3000-2400 BC) monuments of Wessex marks the prehistory of this region of southern Britain as something exceptional. On the chalklands of Wiltshire and Dorset are found the great monument complexes around Avebury, Stonehenge, Knowlton and Dorchester (Darvill 2006; Lawson 2007; Pollard and Reynolds 2002); while on the greensand of the Vale of Pewsey, between Avebury and Stonehenge is the Marden henge – possibly the largest monument of its kind (Wainwright 1971). Not far to the west, and surely related to the Wessex complexes, are the stone circles, henge enclosures and other constructions on deposits of Keuper Marl at Stanton Drew, Somerset (David et al. 2004); here including the second largest stone circle in the British Isles (Figures 1-4). Superlatives might abound – the world's largest prehistoric stone circle at Avebury; Europe's largest prehistoric mound at Silbury Hill; megalith transportation over the longest recorded distance in prehistoric Europe at Stonehenge; and so on (though note a Welsh victory when it comes to timber monuments, with the colossal palisade at Hindwell, Powys: Gibson 1999). It is hardly surprising then that the monuments of Neolithic Wessex have attracted a lengthy and sustained history of research; although it is also sobering to reflect that many basic questions relating to the period within this region remain to be addressed.

There has been a good body of work on the henge monuments of Wessex over the last decade, with renewed excavations at Stonehenge (Darvill and Wainwright 2009; Parker Pearson 2012), Avebury (Gillings et al. 2008), Durrington Walls and Woodhenge (Parker Pearson 2012; Parker Pearson et al. 2006), and Marden (Leary et al. 2010). A new henge has been discovered through excavation at Bluestonehenge (Parker Pearson et al. 2009), and further details of the structure of the Mount Pleasant henge has been revealed through aerial photography (Barber 2004). This period has also seen the publication of the excavations on the Wyke Down 2 henge on Cranborne Chase (French et al. 2007). The results provide a set of better chronologies and a much enhanced understanding of the role of these monuments. Their temporal span runs from the very beginning of the 3rd millennium BC (Stonehenge 1), with the larger 'henge enclosures' of Avebury (in its second phase), Mount Pleasant, Durrington Walls and probably

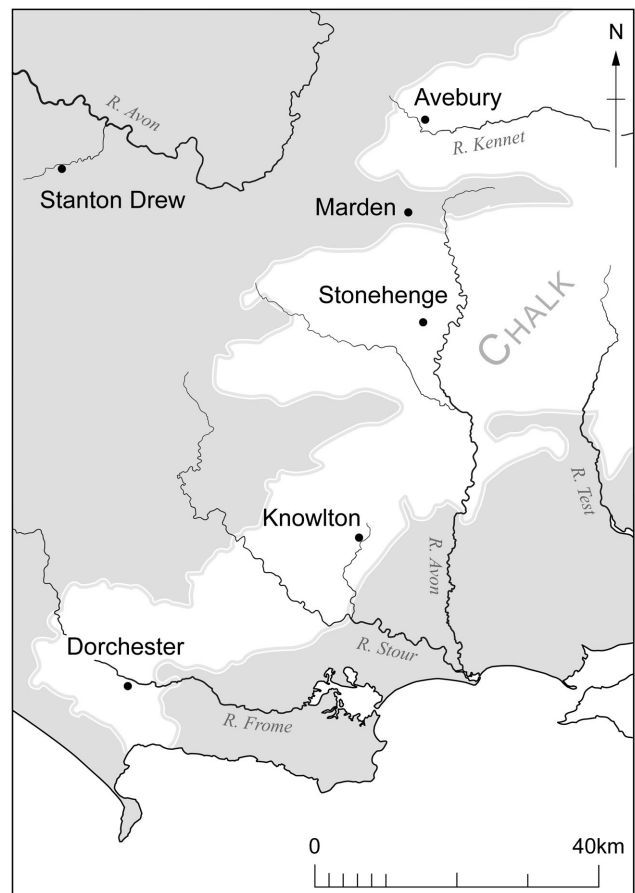


FIGURE 1. THE WESSEX REGION (DRAWING: ANNE LEAVER)

Marden falling within the period *c.*2800-2500BC (Parker Pearson 2012; Pitts 2001, Pollard and Cleal 2004). Of the smaller henge earthworks, Wyke Down 2 and Coneybury look to belong early in the 3rd millennium BC, while those enclosing Woodhenge and Bluestonehenge belong in the second half of that millennium (Barrett et al. 1991; Cleal and Pollard 2012; French et al. 2007; Pitts 2001; Richards 1990). Origins might be sought more distantly (even from Orkney given the early dates from sites such as Stenness: Richards 2005), or more locally among a range of circular earthwork constructions that include the Flagstones enclosure at Dorchester (Healy 1997) and the pit circle at

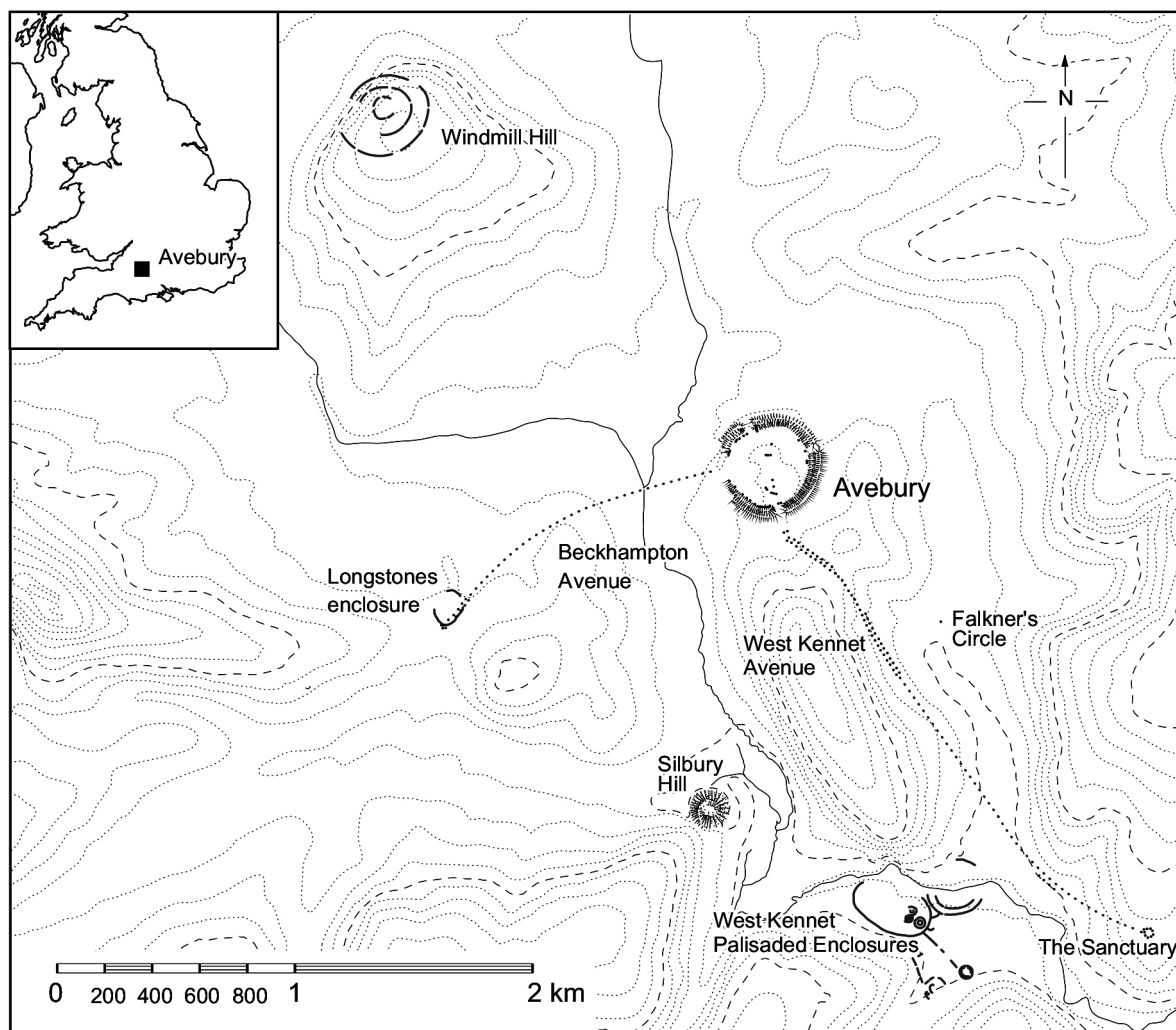


FIGURE 2. THE AVEBURY MONUMENT COMPLEX (DRAWING: RICK PETERSON)

Monkton up Wimborne on Cranborne Chase (French et al. 2007).

There is great variety in the format and structure of the region's henge monuments (cf. Harding 2003; Harding and Lee 1987). The henge earthworks themselves enclose settings of standing stones (Stonehenge, Avebury, Bluestonehenge, Stanton Drew, Site IV at Mount Pleasant), former timber settings (Woodhenge, Durrington Walls, Stanton Drew, Site IV, Coneybury), smaller henges (Durrington Walls, Mount Pleasant, Marden), large mounds (Marden), or nothing (visible) at all (Wyke Down). A number of related structures share 'henge-like' characteristics, including the Sanctuary near Avebury (Cunnington 1931), where an outer stone circle effectively substitutes for a henge earthwork, and the inner palisade enclosures at West Kennet, which 'wrap' smaller timber structures in much the same fashion (Whittle 1997). Such variety highlights both the inadequacy of our classificatory schemes (Gibson, this volume), and the possibilities for combination and appropriate deployment of a repertoire of architectural devices that presented themselves to Neolithic communities (Thomas 2004). At a general level, what might have mattered most were the properties of the

substances – stone, earth, timber, and so forth – that were engaged to create these monuments. The idea, for instance, that stone was ontologically connected to ancestral realms, while timber held a closer connection to corporeal life, does hold remarkably well through various sets of material associations for complexes such as those around Stonehenge and Avebury during the middle of the 3rd millennium BC (Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998; Parker Pearson et al. 2006). Perhaps because of perceived transformatory and life-giving properties, streams, rivers and other water features also hold a recurrent connection with many of these monuments, *regardless of their form* (cf. Leary and Field 2010).

The concern is not, then, to become embroiled in complex discussion over categorisation, because the answers to many of our questions relating to these constructions do not lie within typological refinement (Bradley 1998, 2000). By asking why monuments might be constructed in the first place, and in the locations where they were, we might be better able to understand their form and purpose. Here the matter is approached at two scales: first at a macro level by asking why Wessex should be so different, and why the region should have become such a focus for

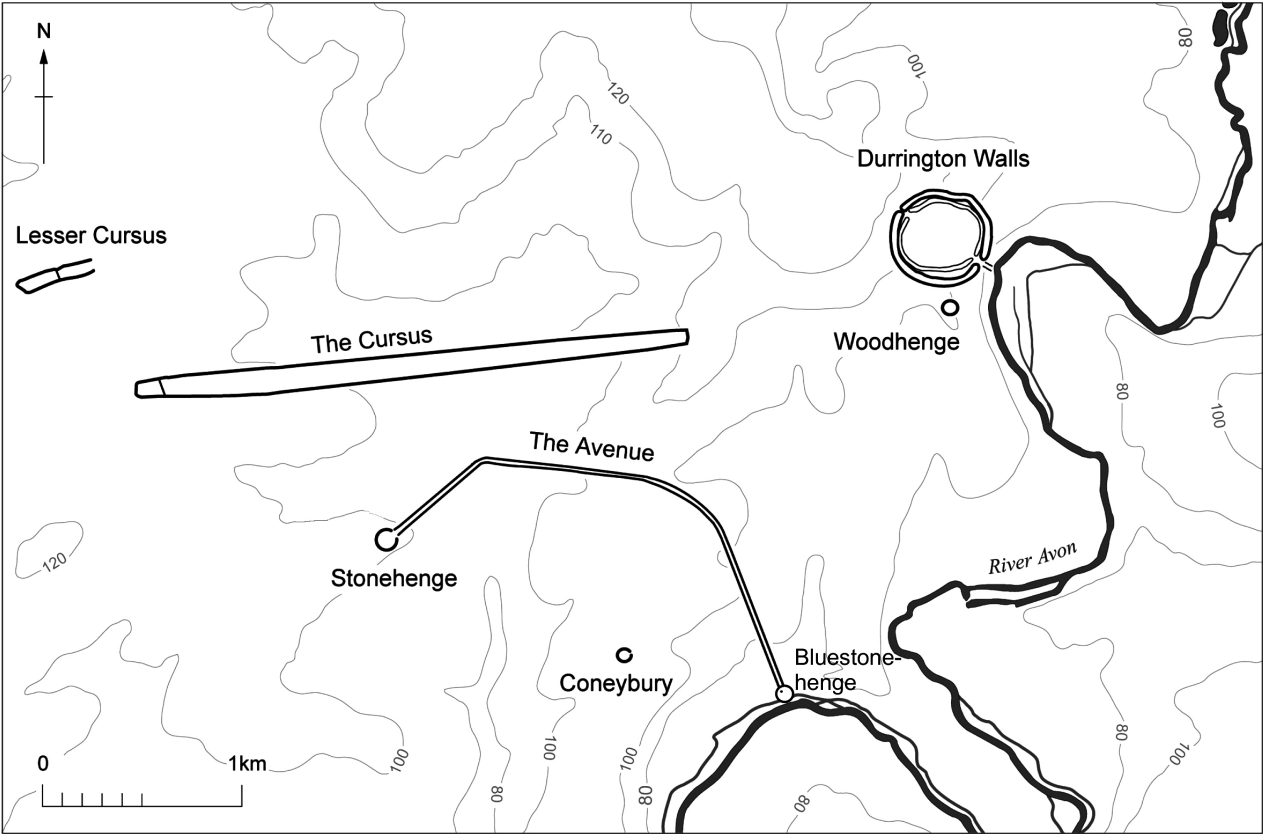


FIGURE 3. THE STONEHENGE MONUMENT COMPLEX (DRAWING: ANNE LEAVER)

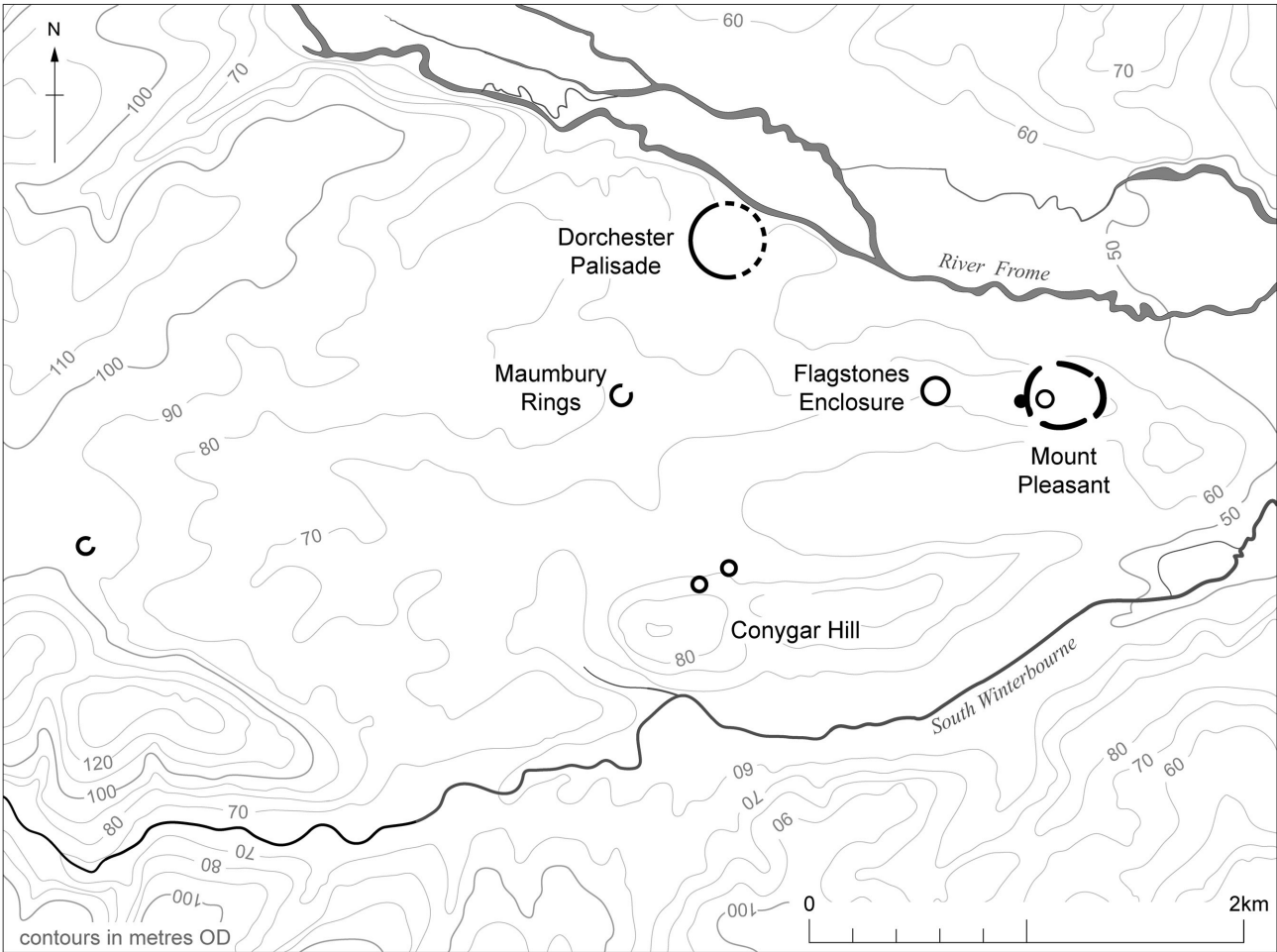


FIGURE 4. THE DORCHESTER MONUMENT COMPLEX (DRAWING: ANNE LEAVER)



monument construction during the first three quarters of the 3rd millennium BC. The second is more specific and seeks to understand the local conditions in which places might be transformed and become sufficiently sanctified to require monumentalisation. Places and their properties, powers and politics all played their part. In particular, there often exists a close link between settlements and settlement histories and the eventual creation of henges, highlighting processes by which the status of certain locations could shift over time, some becoming progressively more sacred (and others not). This process often involves a sanctification of structures and material traces.

### Why Wessex?

It is stressed above that events displayed in Wessex during the later Neolithic are not typical of those of many other regions of Britain. They are somewhat remarkable, and we must account for this. Several features, both historic and inherent to the region make it distinctive.

#### *Beginnings*

First, there is the issue of longer, pre-Neolithic histories of activity within the wider region. It is striking that, with the exception of Cranborne Chase (Barrett et al. 1991, 29-30; French et al. 2007, 219-20), the higher areas of chalkland later occupied by Neolithic monuments seem not to have attracted a sustained late Mesolithic presence, perhaps because they were both too dry and largely devoid of concentrations of game. In the Stonehenge landscape what late Mesolithic activity has been identified is confined to the corridor of the Avon valley; while that in the wider environs of the Avebury landscape is largely focused further downstream along the Kennet or on the claylands to the west (Darvill 2006; Pollard and Reynolds 2004). For the Avebury region, Whittle (1990) proposed a process of infill early in the Neolithic, and this remains a viable model. The relative 'emptiness' of these landscapes could have afforded them a distinctive character – one that was more closely connected to the new worlds of Neolithic living than older frames of reference.

#### *Identity and place*

Second, the broader distribution of distinctive types of earlier Neolithic monuments and certain forms of material culture mark out this part of southern Britain as a zone of overlap between different traditions that might be generalised as 'eastern' and 'western'. Both (eastern) earthen and chambered (western) Cotswold-Severn style long mounds overlap here (Darvill 2004; Kinnes 1992). The principal concentration of causewayed enclosures occurs in a north-east–south-west band running from the Upper Thames Valley onto the Wessex chalk (Oswald et al. 2001, fig. 1.1). Two of the largest of these – Windmill Hill and Hambledon Hill – are located in similar topographic positions on the edge of the high chalk facing out to the north and west, reflecting connections seen in the material culture deposited on those sites (Mercer and

Healy 2008; Whittle et al. 1999). Undoubtedly, part of the role of these large enclosures was to facilitate and mediate contacts between different communities (Edmonds 1999), both sites potentially possessing very wide 'catchments' for periodic gatherings that could have brought together people from regions as distant as the South-Western Peninsular, Cotswolds, the south coast and Middle Thames Valley. Aspects of the early-mid-4th millennium BC artefact record also highlight the overlap of different cultural traditions along the Wessex chalk. The area lies at the junction of two different earlier Neolithic 'families' of pottery – Southern Decorated Wares and South-Western styles (Darvill 2010, fig. 33). Wessex is perhaps less a fault line, than a liminal zone in which communities with two or more distinct senses of origin met. That status was maintained into the 3rd millennium BC, when even larger scale gatherings are implied by massive public monuments such as Avebury, Stonehenge and Mount Pleasant. Their spheres of influence are hinted at by the long distances over which animals (and so people) were moved, into and across the region as illustrated by data coming from recent strontium and oxygen isotope work carried out by the Feeding Stonehenge Project (Viner et al. 2010). In its principal stone phase, Stonehenge might even have stood as a monument that represented the uniting of previously fractious communities from across southern Britain (Parker Pearson pers. comm.). Certainly by the late Neolithic, the 'core' landscapes of Wessex had become potent places with deep and politically complex histories.

#### *Landscape*

Could the very character of the Wessex landscape have afforded it qualities that were perceived as special and which set it apart from other regions of southern Britain? Especially when approached from their northern and western edges, the dramatic escarpments of the Wessex chalklands offer a striking and distinctive topography; while movement onto their tops gives the impression of entering a vast elevated plateau. The effect in places is somewhat like stepping onto an island surrounded by a sea of clay, gravel and greensand vales. That sense of height, and of a *different place* may have been regarded as highly significant. There is also something distinctive about the elemental constituents and qualities of the chalk: its weather (the chalk and its coombes capture moisture, resulting in distinctive mists and light); its springs and seasonal streams (the winterbournes: Cleal 2005); bands of flint and spreads of sarsen stone (Field 2005); and even the chalk itself. Form, texture, colour, and atmosphere all play their part.

The whiteness of chalk and its workability may have been important qualities, and these, along with presence of bands of flint contained within, perhaps made this rock a potent and generative substance rather than just inert geology (cf. papers in Boivin and Owoc 2004 for concepts of animate geology). It is surely not coincidental that chalk was preferentially chosen over other malleable substances such as clay as the medium for manufacturing a range of



FIGURE 5. THE AVEBURY HENGES DITCH UNDER EXCAVATION BY HAROLD ST. GEORGE GRAY DURING THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20TH CENTURY (PHOTO: ALEXANDER KEILLER MUSEUM, AVEBURY)

objects likely linked to fertility concerns, notably phalli, balls and cups (Teather 2007). Direct links between this material and concepts of regeneration might be implied by the use of chalk capping on later round barrow mounds. That special quality afforded to chalk as a substance is also reflected in attempts to dig deep into the rock. At Avebury, Harold St George Gray's excavations during the early part of the 20th century dramatically illustrated the incredible depth (over 9m at the southern entrance) and narrowness of the henge ditch (Figure 5); in places its base reaching the interface between the chalk and water-table (Gray 1935). As Ashbee (2004) notes, the profile of the ditch ensured that its lower third silted rapidly, so depth here was not sought for lasting visual effect. The same desire for deep penetration of the chalk is seen with the shafts dug into the base of the henge ditch at Maumbury Rings (Bradley 1975), and with the shaft-within-pit feature of the late 4th millennium BC Monkton-up-Wimborne monument (French et al. 2007). At Maumbury Rings, in acts which suggest a complex reciprocal relationship with the chalk – literally an 'economy of substances' (Thomas 1999) – a remarkable series of deposits of carved chalk, stag's skulls,

antler and human bone were sealed within the backfill of the shafts (Bradley 1975).

Shafts and pit-defined ditches are a feature of many of the Cranborne Chase and Dorchester henges. In addition to Maumbury Rings and Monkton-up-Wimborne, one can note their occurrence at the Wyke Down henges (Barrett et al. 1991; French et al. 2007), probably with the first phase at Site IV, Mount Pleasant (Wainwright 1979), at Flagstones, and forming the circuits of the small Conygar Hill monuments (Smith et al. 1997). There is a strong possibility that the deeper and more dramatic of these artificial pits were dug to emulate natural solution holes on the chalk of this region (Tilley 1999, 225-9). The natural collapse feature in Firtree Field on Cranborne Chase looks to have opened up during the late 5th millennium BC, and received a series of deposits in its upper fills (French et al. 2007, 76-8). Other possible solution/sink holes run alongside the Knowlton henge complex (French et al. 2007, 41), and it could be that their presence marked this location as one where enhanced intercession with the supernatural occurred. It is not difficult to image how these 'openings-up' into an underworld, into the heart of the chalk, were invested with enormous significance, being perceived as the actions of spirits, gods or other spiritual beings that dwelt in the rock and its underground streams.

Digging deep perhaps afforded communication and negotiation with those agencies. There can be little doubt that natural features were often ascribed great potency, and that their presence affected the way landscapes were understood and engaged with (Bradley 2000), often leading to significant acts of monumentalisation. Within the Stonehenge environs, the initial axis of the Greater Cursus was aligned on the distinctively-profiled Beacon Hill to the east (Thomas et al. 2009), one of the more remarkable landmarks in this otherwise 'unremarkable' landscape (Tilley et al. 2007). However, it is at Stonehenge itself where the most dramatic evidence of monumentalisation arising from the ascription of supernatural/mythic value to a natural feature can be found. Recent excavations by the Stonehenge Riverside Project have shown that the solstice-aligned section of the Avenue running from the north-east entrance of monument is essentially a geological feature, augmented around 2400BC by the cutting of shallow lengths of ditch (Parker Pearson 2012). Here, through a freak of geology, heaven and earth literally came together in a natural feature that emulated the form of a weathered and ancient earthwork possessed of a solstitial alignment. Perhaps recognised for millennia, given the presence close by of the remarkable 8th-millennium BC Stonehenge car



park post-alignment (Cleal et al. 1995), its presence must surely provide the reason for the particular siting of the Stonehenge monument.

Around the headwaters of the Kennet near Avebury, and to a lesser extent in the Vale of Pewsey and on Salisbury Plain, another natural feature afforded these landscapes considerable significance – that was the presence in varying densities of spreads of resilient Tertiary sandstone known as sarsen. The greatest concentration occurred in the dry valleys bisecting the chalk around the headwaters of the River Kennet at Avebury, where its sheer presence must have given this landscape a distinctly ‘foreign’ feel; different from many other regions of chalk, and perhaps closely affiliated in the minds of Neolithic communities with the stoney uplands of the far west. (Again, the sense of the qualities of ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ worlds coming together in this region must be stressed.) Sarsen was widely used in the creation of burial chambers during the region’s earlier Neolithic, and in circles, avenues and box-like ‘cove’ features during the late Neolithic (Gillings et al. 2008; Pollard and Reynolds 2002). The same stone was chosen for the outer circle and trilithon settings at Stonehenge (Cleal et al. 1995), and in the cove inside the Site IV henge at Mount Pleasant (Wainwright 1979). It would be a mistake, however, to think that this stone was simply regarded as a hindrance or inert building material (Gillings and Pollard 1999; Pollard and Gillings 2009). The way it was engaged with is telling of a recognition of an ontological status different to that of modern geological definitions; perhaps even, on occasions, stones being perceived as invested with a certain animism. During the 4th millennium BC even quite tiny blocks of sarsen could engender respectful treatment or actions of ‘control’, seen for example with the peculiar care taken with their incorporation within the non-funerary long mounds of South Street and Beckhampton Road (Ashbee et al. 1979).

During the 3rd millennium BC certain sarsens in the Stonehenge landscape – notably at Bulford and the Cuckoo Stone – were raised from their natural positions and set as standing stones; a process that surely altered their status, yet still respected their existing identity as important entities (Colin Richards pers. comm.). On a very different scale, those sarsens utilized for the outer circle and trilithons of the great monument at Stonehenge were both divorced from their locations of origin and modified in such a way that little of their given form remained evident. At Avebury, the stones used in the circles, avenues and other settings were left unworked (Smith 1965a). By virtue of their size, distinctive shape and prior histories (indicated by zones of axe polishing), at least some of these stones possessed an identity – as known and perhaps named things – that was not removed but transferred to the new locations where they were re-set. We could see that process as one in which the potency of stone was being harnessed (Gillings and Pollard 2004, 69).

Human history, geology and topography all collided to make the Wessex chalk a special place. Out of what we

might call nature or geology, but which to Neolithic minds was a world of potent agencies and creative forces, some perhaps generated during a mythic time of beginning, came the conditions within which monumentalisation could occur.

### A sense of place

We can therefore make a claim that the conditions for the creation of the major 3rd millennium BC ceremonial complexes around Avebury, Stonehenge, Knowlton and Dorchester arose, in part, from the particular location of Wessex, and the distinctiveness of its geology, topography and other elements. Occasionally, as with Stonehenge and its avenue, it might be the presence of remarkable natural features that provides the explanation for the location of major monuments – their building was a response to the qualities of place. Another dimension to this significance of place can be found in the relationship between the dynamic histories of settlement and monument creation. It is all too easy to think of these clusters of monuments as forming primarily ‘ceremonial landscapes’. Admittedly, there are occasions when the evidence looks that way: when henge and other monuments have no obvious structural or spatial connection to contemporary settlement features. A case in point is provided by the Thornborough and Ferrybridge henge complexes in Yorkshire, where evidence suggests settlement at some distance (Harding 2000; Roberts 2005). That is not the case with any of the Wessex complexes, where monuments were built within landscapes with well-established histories of settlement, and where spatially the two sorts of activity might overlap. The ubiquity of contemporary lithic scatters and other traces of settlement show these landscapes to have been, periodically at least, quite densely occupied (Barrett et al. 1991; French et al. 2007; Holgate 1987; Richards 1990).

This leads on to the question of how the quotidian and the sacred intersect in the context of monument creation. Should we see the dynamics and imperatives of monument building as separate to the concerns of the everyday? On one level the dynamics of settlement and monument building have to be related, since the very process of mobilising resources and labour to create major structures involves people being drawn in to inhabit these landscapes while that work went on. The traces of this monument-driven settlement can be dramatic, as seen with the extensive, mid-3rd millennium BC seasonal settlement at Durrington Walls, linked to the building of the Southern Circle and likely main stone phase of Stonehenge (Parker Pearson 2007). In fact, the relationship between settlement and monument creation can be both more complicated and sometimes indirect, but nonetheless critical to understanding the imperative for making ‘ceremonial’ architecture, and it is this issue which will be explored here.

At this point several strands of recent observation need to be drawn together. The first is Bradley’s (2005) argument that ritualization often follows the logic of concerns of daily life, so we might expect that the format of particular



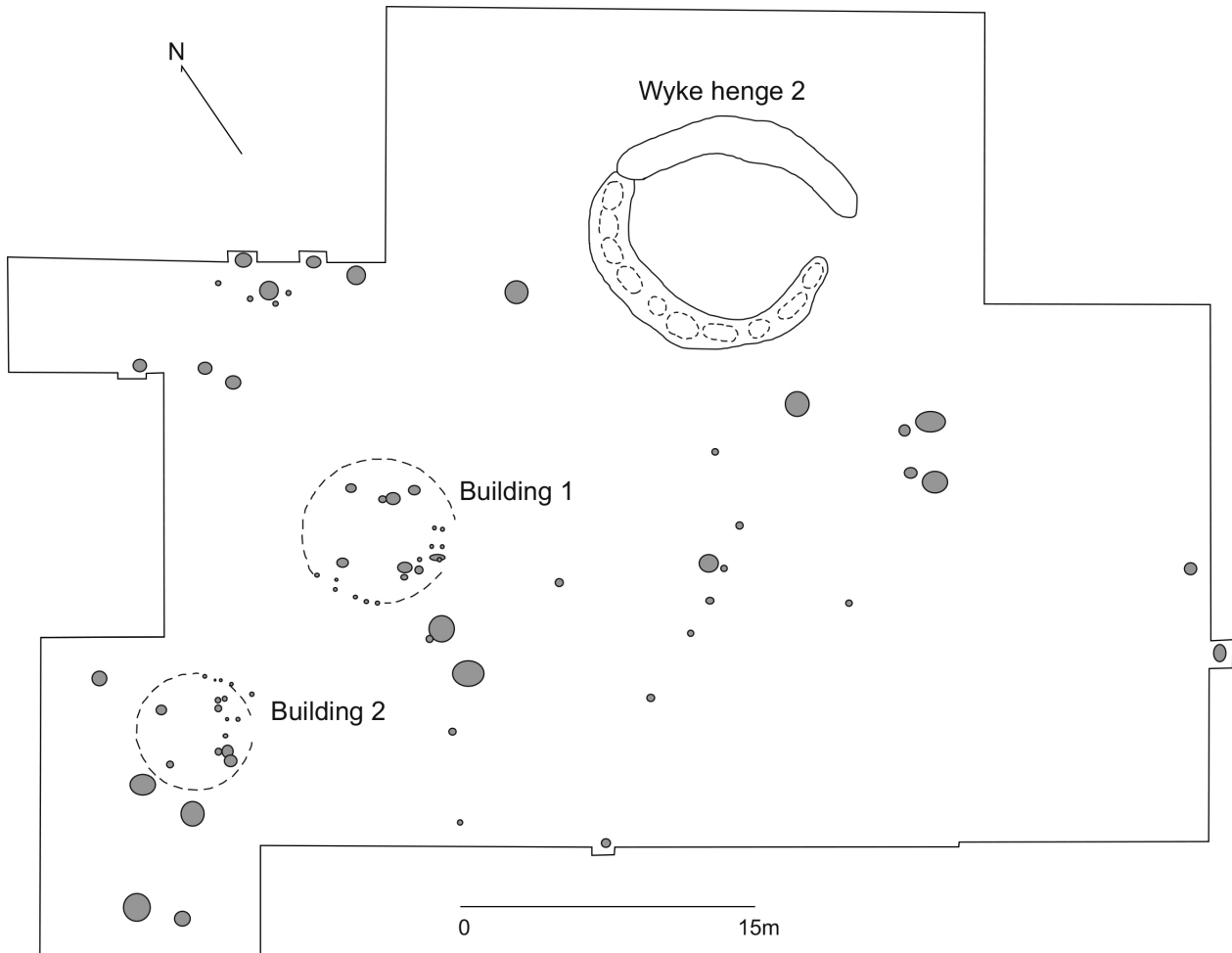


FIGURE 6. SETTLEMENT FEATURES AND STRUCTURES AND HENGES 2 AT WYKE DOWN (AFTER FRENCH ET AL. 2007)

monuments drew upon domestic architecture or that elements of routine practice might be elaborated to form the basis for ritual. The second relates directly to henge monuments and their function, and stresses their role as technologies of control. With reference to both henge-like enclosures of the Irish Iron Age and Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age earthworks of this kind, Warner (2000) and Gibson (2004) make the highly pertinent observation that their common ‘inverted’ earthwork format (with ditch inside bank) was designed to keep spiritual agencies or other kinds of sacred forces inside, thus protecting the outside world. The third is that there often exists a ‘narrative’ structure to individual henge sequences (Bradley 2011), and that where timber circles are present, they pre-date the henge earthworks themselves (Gibson 2004). It is certainly possible to see that sequence from radiocarbon chronologies at Durrington Walls and Woodhenge (Parker Pearson et al. in press). In this case, henges could be seen as a form of closure, marking the end point of sequences of activity (Gibson 2004, 79). Equally, and drawing upon the second of the observations highlighted here, the decision to enclose with a henge earthwork could reflect a change in the ontological status of the space and structural traces to be contained, signifying its newly enhanced potency or sacredness. With these observations in mind – and

with an awareness of how place, its history, associations and qualities mattered when it came to create sacred architecture – the relationship between sequences of settlement and the building of timber circles and henges can be explored.

#### *Settlements and henges: the case of Wyke Down*

The first case study relates to activity at Wyke Down/Down Farm, on Cranborne Chase. This is an area with a record of dense middle and late Neolithic settlement that followed on from the construction of the Dorset Cursus (Barrett et al. 1991, French et al. 2007). In the case the Chalkpit Field site, middle Neolithic settlement was even located within the area between the ditches of the Cursus, and included a number of very distinctive artefact types (Barrett et al. 1991, 70-5).

At Wyke Down, Martin Green’s excellent fieldwork revealed two small henge monuments set 40m apart, at least one of which (the northern-most) was located within or on the edge of an area of settlement-related features (Green, in French et al. 2007, 83-94) (Figure 6). Radiocarbon dates suggest that the settlement features and northern henge are broadly contemporary (Building 1: 2900-2830,

2820-2670 cal BC; Building 2: 2880-2570 cal BC; Henge 2: 2930-2860, 2810-2750 cal BC). Among the settlement features are pits, stake-holes, post lines and two post-built structures (Buildings 1 and 2), all associated with Grooved Ware. Such traces are typical of late Neolithic settlement activity, the exception being the two buildings to the west of the henge, both of which are circular with square central settings of posts. These are cautiously interpreted as elaborate houses or ceremonial structures; the difficulty in deciding their status reflecting the problem often encountered in deciding, quite erroneously, where the dividing line between the quotidian and the sacred should lie. That the walls of these structures were coated in daub (i.e. they were wall-enclosed rather than free-standing post rings), and that they should be associated with the same kinds of material as found within adjacent pits, could suggest they were lived in; but they were most probably not ordinary dwellings. Differences existed between the two structures. The clay-based daub from Building 2 – that furthest from the henge, and the smaller of the two structures – was coarse compared with that of Building 1. Exceptionally, decorated wall plaster was recovered from Building 1 (Green and Muros, in French et al. 2007, 333-4). Relative proximity to the henge might here be reflected in the scale and elaboration of the structures. In fact, the distinction between the structures and henge may be more a matter of degree than absolute kind. The buildings share the same south-east axis as the henge, they are set along a common east-west line, and the area enclosed by the henge earthwork is only slightly greater than that of Building 1. The relative status of the structures – and by that we might even mean degrees of sacredness, or connections to senior and junior lineages – increased from west to east: from Building 2, to Building 1, and then the henge.

All three constructions received deposits of pottery, lithics and animal bone. The Grooved Ware ceramics from the henge and the pits and structures share decorative features and fabrics in common (Cleal, in French et al. 2007, 322); and while there is a slightly higher percentage of retouched and utilised pieces from the settlement pits (7.4% as opposed to 4.4%), the lithic assemblages are similar. The only major distinction exists in the respective faunal assemblages, with cattle bone as opposed to pig being predominant in both henges (Rothwell and Maltby, in French et al. 2007, 320).

Here, there clearly exists a very close association between henge and settlement, both in terms of the level of spatial integration of different structures, and the generation and deposition of similar material assemblages. Given that their contents are not dissimilar to those placed within the settlement pits (perhaps as part of closing/commemorative rites: Thomas 2012), the deposits within the pit-defined ditches of both the Wyke Down 1 and 2 henges could even be seen as a translation and multiplication of practices routinely associated with settlement events – material performances at the henges condensed in some way the relations and practices that made up ordinary life.

However, while these connections and relations can be drawn out, the physical form of the henges – the use of enclosing earthworks – should not be neglected. Following the observations of Warner and Gibson, we should ask why the space enclosed within the henge earthworks needed to be *controlled*. Why would a timber circle, a simple fenced area or more elaborate version of the circular buildings not suffice? One possibility is that the henges contained spaces connected to funerary rites, and that the earthworks served to control the kinds of pollution or spiritual risk often associated with recent death (Bloch and Parry 1982; Hertz 1960). This gains some support from the subtle distinctions in the range of material from henge and settlement-feature contexts (Barrett et al. 1991, 92-106). Among those things deposited in the Wyke Down 1 henge were items of carved chalk and even human bone. Most telling of all though is the preponderance of cattle bone in the assemblages from both henges, contrasting with the pig-dominated assemblages from both the Wyke Down and Firtree Field pits, since the slaughter and consumption of cattle is routinely linked to mortuary feasting and other ritual occasions (Parker Pearson 2000). The ceramics, lithics and other material placed in the henge ditch pits could then be refuse connected to the households of the deceased, its incorporation linked to processes of control of death pollution. Whether this interpretation is accurate in its details is perhaps less important than the observation of the close relationship between kinds of signature (settlement versus monument) that we might normally regard as distinct or even antithetical.

#### *The accruing significance and sacredness of place*

While unusual, the two buildings at Wyke Down belong to a wider architectural tradition of ‘square-in-circle’ structures that take as their prototype small stake-built houses such as those excavated at Trelystan, Powys (Britnell 1982), and the eastern entrance at Durrington Walls (Parker Pearson 2007). It is possible to see a continuum from these small buildings, to those with internal settings of four posts, as at Wyke Down, to larger, more elaborated and clearly monumental versions such as the Northern Circle at Durrington Walls and that at Durrington 68 (Gibson 2005; Pollard 1995; Wainwright and Longworth 1971) (Figure 7). Through multiplication of enclosing post rings, at least one of these structures – that of the Southern Circle at Durrington Walls – was transformed into a highly elaborated timber circle that was the wooden equivalent of the stone settings at Stonehenge (Pollard 2009; Thomas 2007, 2010). Bradley has described this process of mimicry and elaboration as one of the ‘consecration of the house’ (Bradley 2005, 74). Using the house as a template for monumental constructions is by no means unusual, even in the Neolithic where we see the same process happening a millennium and a half earlier in the Paris Basin and Northern European Plain with the transformation of the long house into the long mound (Bradley 1998; Hodder 1994). The ethnographic record speaks of the power and complexity of the concept of the house, perhaps not surprising since it is the medium through which rights,





FIGURE 7. THE DURRINGTON 68 TIMBER SETTING UNDER EXCAVATION. THE CURVING DITCH BELONGS TO A LATER, EARLY BRONZE AGE, ROUND BARROW (PHOTO: ADAM STANFORD © AERIAL-CAM)

responsibilities, structures of order, and the family as a social and biological unit are often reproduced (e.g. Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; Waterson 1990).

A variety of roles could be postulated for the square-in-circle structures at Wyke Down, Durrington 68 and elsewhere, ranging from the residences of high status individuals, to cult houses, origin houses and shrines. Their functions must have varied widely, and they should best be seen as an architectural resource to be drawn upon and developed according to context. What is pertinent to the discussion of henge monuments is the way in which these structures were treated at the end of their lives. As with the much smaller houses at Durrington Walls (Parker Pearson 2007), pairs of pits were cut in the former entrance areas of the Durrington 68 and 70 structures, into which were placed ‘commemorative’/‘decommissioning’ deposits. In the case of the larger multiple circles of Woodhenge and the Southern Circle, a related practice saw pits cut into the tops of the larger post-holes after the timbers had rotted (Pollard and Robinson 2007; Thomas 2007). The status of these structures was such they could not simply be left – respectful and appropriate actions had to be performed, in much the same way as funerary feasts might be held for the dead.

In certain instances, notably with those structures at Wyke Down, Durrington 68 and 70, no further monumental

intervention was required, perhaps because they soon lost their significance. However, other comparable buildings in the western interior of Durrington Walls were enclosed within henge earthworks (Thomas 2007). It is not clear whether this happened after the structures went out of use, but elsewhere the sequence always runs from timber settings/structures to henge (Gibson 2004, 2005), implying a critical change in the ontological status of these places at the point when they were enclosed. Woodhenge provides a case in point (Cunnington 1929; Pollard and Robinson 2007). The henge earthwork was constructed in the third or fourth quarter of the 3rd millennium BC (2470-2030 BC and 2340-2010 BC), while the one radiocarbon date from the timber settings (a cremation from post-hole C14, dated to 2576-2468 cal BC) suggests a mid 3rd millennium BC date for their construction, perhaps contemporary with that of the nearby Southern Circle. The henge itself likely belongs with a megalithic phase to the monument. The sequence is in fact more complex, perhaps beginning with a phase of Grooved Ware associated settlement which may even have pre-dated the timber rings (Figure 8). Cunnington noted that ‘wherever there were remains of the bank relics were found in the old surface layer beneath it, consisting mostly of broken animal bones and scattered fragments of pottery’ (Cunnington 1929, 5). One area of buried soil on the western side included a layer of burnt flint, and on northern side a knapping scatter was found (Cunnington 1929, 6, 76). The large and fresh condition

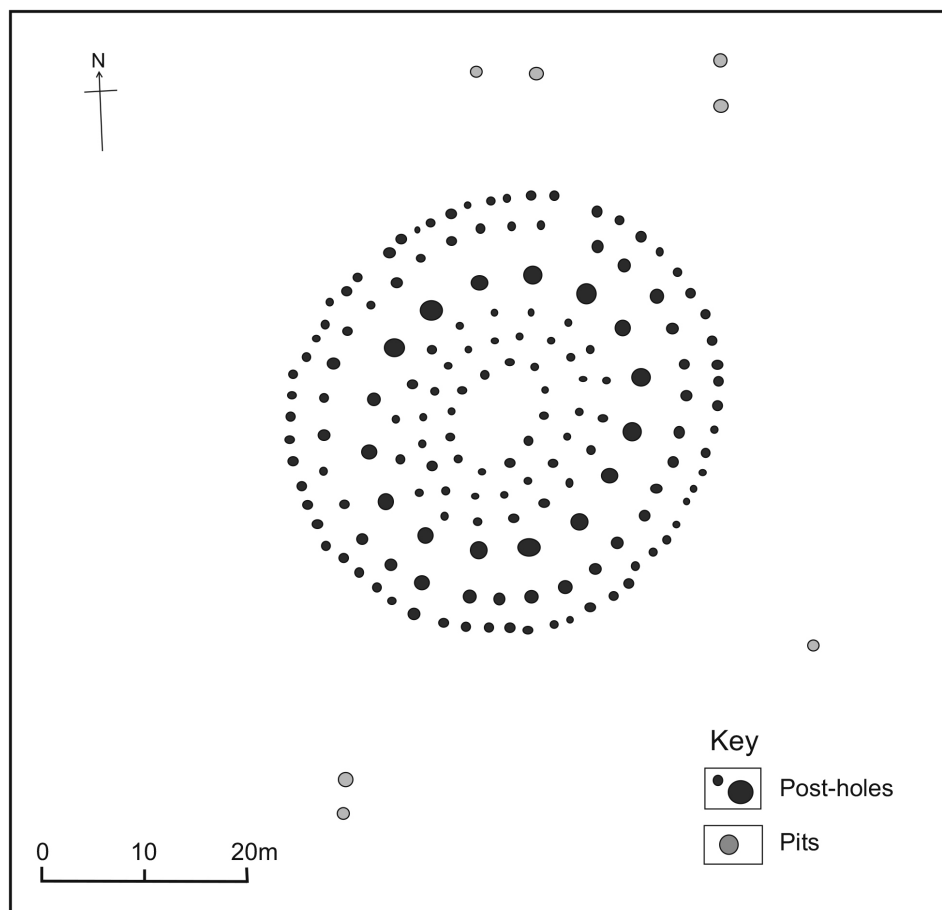


FIGURE 8. PRE-HENGE FEATURES AT WOODHENGE (AFTER CUNNINGTON 1931)

of Grooved Ware sherds from the buried soil hint at the presence of protective midden spreads. Three sets of paired pits under the bank and on the berm between the bank and ditch could mark the locations of houses, since they are similar in size and content to the ‘decommissioning’ pits associated with the Durrington houses. Here the sequence looks to run from settlement to henge.

Much the same sequence seems to characterise events at Coneybury, but at an earlier date, and without (so far as we are aware) a final megalithic phase (Richards 1990). Within the interior of the henge are a series of pits and post-holes that probably pre-date the earthwork (Figure 9). The larger of these, features 1608, 1619, 1603, 1601, 1177, look to have held uprights (Richards 1990, 13), describing either a six-post setting or square central setting with ‘entrance’ posts (1608 and 1619). 1608 is cut by a pit containing Grooved Ware, and there are two other pits (1844 and 1848) to the east that lie on the arc of a surrounding fence oval c.25m across. Their position recalls that of the ‘commemorative’/‘decommissioning’ pits at Durrington 68 and 70. The whole is reminiscent of another square-in-circle structure, albeit on a fairly massive scale. Across the interior and outside the area of the ditch were numerous stake-holes, some of which must pre-date the earthwork since they occur in zones subsequently occupied by the bank. They may represent traces of stake-built houses of the kind found at Durrington.

At Coneybury the ploughsoil was subject to gridded excavation and the area around the monument fieldwalked. We can therefore link surface worked flint densities with sub-soil features. Both methods yielded large quantities of lithics that were generated through lengthy and/or intense periods of settlement. The results of extensive surface collection show the henge to lie within the centre of a large scatter at least 700 x 400m across (Richards 1990, fig. 10). In places, notably to the north-west, lithic densities reach 90+ pieces per 50m transect. While scatter sites often represent palimpsests of activity, that at Coneybury includes a good number of distinctive middle/late Neolithic tool types, such as rods/fabricators, chisel and oblique arrowheads, the latter clustering close to the area of the henge (Richards 1990, fig. 158). Almost 12,000 pieces of worked flint came from the ploughsoil excavation across the henge interior and ditch, densities averaging 26.5 pieces of flint per square metre, but in places reaching over 50 per metre. Middle/late Neolithic chisel arrowheads are again well represented within this material (Richards 1990, 124-6). Of note is the fact that concentrations of tool types seem to ring the area of the fenced enclosure within which the timber structure sits (Richards 1990, fig. 96), suggesting it was surrounded by surface midden deposits.

The different strands of evidence point to Coneybury beginning as a large fenced structure sitting at the heart



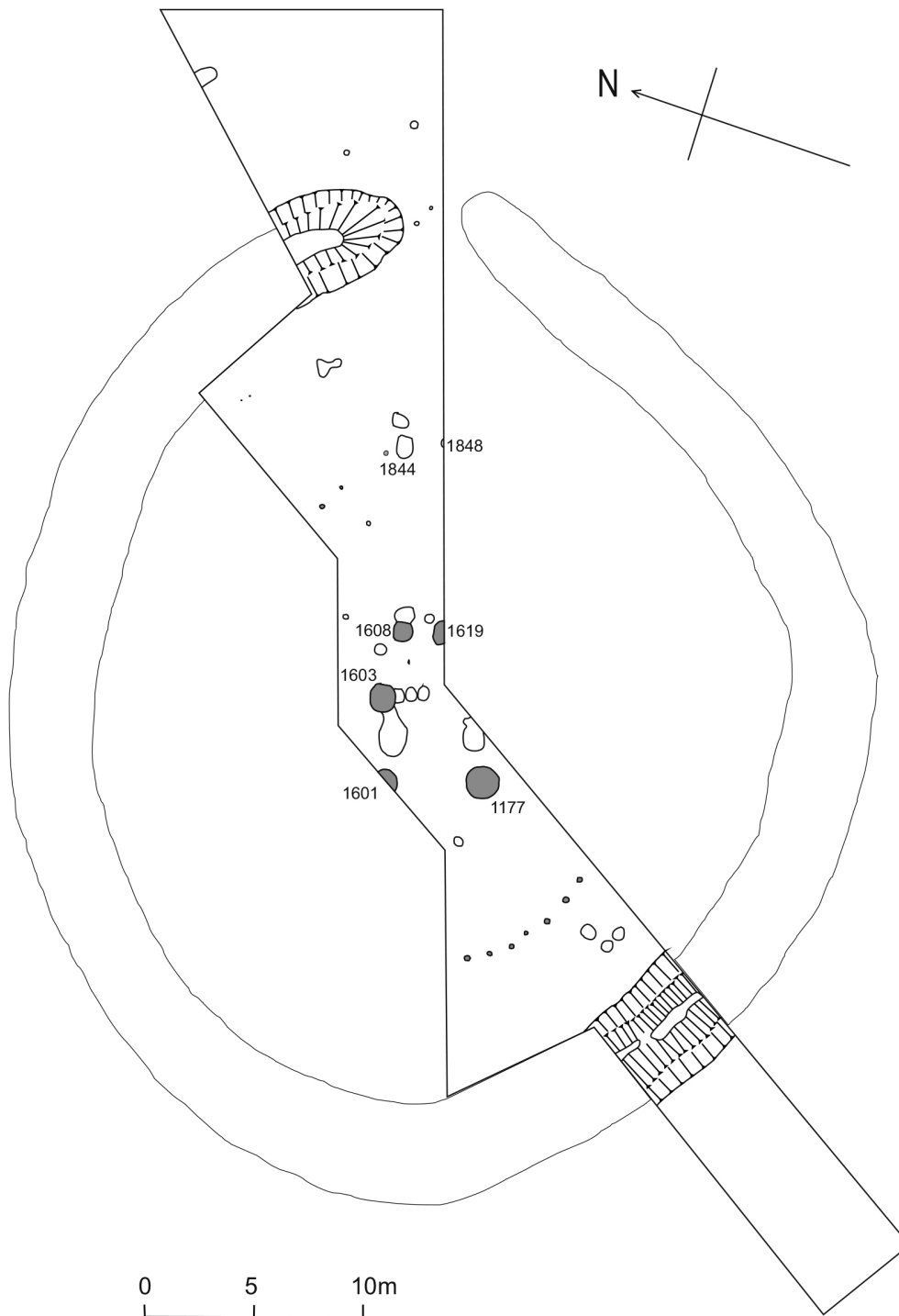


FIGURE 9. THE HENGES AND PRE-HENGES INTERNAL FEATURES AT CONEYBURY. POST-HOLES BELONGING TO THE TIMBER STRUCTURE SHADED GREY (AFTER RICHARDS 1990).

of an extensive settlement. At some point during the first half of the 3rd millennium BC the decision was made to enclose that structure within a henge earthwork; a very dramatic act that physically separated it from the rest of the settlement area and marked it out as something highly special or potent. We will probably never know the detail of events that led to this happening, but the sequence does highlight a process by which certain places or structures that formally operated within a routine context might

eventually become so significant or sacred that they required being 'hanged'. Those events could relate to the process of association then death of a prominent individual perceived to have real spiritual efficacy, an extreme ritual transgression, or simply a perception of accruing supernatural power within a place. The latter explanation might fit best those scenarios where the process leading from settlement to monument was more drawn out. This is probably the case at both Avebury and the Sanctuary, where

there are lengthy histories of 4th and early 3rd millennium BC pre-monument activity that over time might have taken on strong ancestral connotations (Cunnington 1931; Pollard 2005). The agency or ‘sense of weight’ that those connections and connotations came to hold would have provide the pretext for the conversion of these locations into henge and timber circle respectively.

## Discussion

This has been a rather oblique consideration of henges, but intentionally so, since the aim was to highlight the processes by which these monuments and larger monument complexes might have come into being within the Wessex landscape. In so doing, the focus has been on trying to understand both wider and more local historic conditions under which places became imbued with associations, qualities or a sense of sacredness that eventually had to be responded to through monumentalisation (see also Barrett 1994). What we are seeing are the outcomes of historical processes (here entwining religious and supernatural events), some perhaps quite contingent, but ones which can leave a material trace and so be detectable archaeologically. Hopefully, the case studies dealing with Woodhenge and Coneybury have stressed that sequences need not indicate a *continuity* of sacredness or ritual activity, but instead an *emergence* of these qualities and practices; sequences that eventually involved a process of ontological redefinition at the point when henge earthworks were constructed. In a place and time not too distant from late Neolithic Wessex, Bradley’s (1998) account of the dynamics by which central European Neolithic long houses became long mounds provides a notable parallel.

There exists enormous potential for thinking about what monuments did and their intended affects. This could help us side-step the problems of categorization and attempts to ascribe strict functional attributes to these constructions. Particularly powerful is the idea that the process of henge enclosure served to control or contain perceived supernatural forces. Perhaps that could be extended to all forms of enclosure and mounding found in late Neolithic contexts; and perhaps the use of different materials reflected the temporality of that process, and/or the specific nature of the supernatural power that was being contained? In this case, wooden palisades served as mechanisms of temporary control, perhaps being linked to a sense of time-limited spiritual danger associated with certain activities. The destruction of their circuits through burning and post removal, seen at Mount Pleasant (Wainwright 1979), West Kennet (Whittle 1997) and much further afield (see papers in Gibson 2002), could then mark the end of a ritual cycle and a lifting of that sense of danger (cf. Whittle 1997, 158). Good arguments have already been made for close ontological connection between stone and ancestral states in the late Neolithic (Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998). The use of stone in enclosures (specifically circles) or avenues/alignments might then be seen as a means by which ancestral presence and potency was brought in to protect spaces in a permanent fashion. Mounding

might represent the ultimate strategy of control and containment, reserved for especially powerful agencies, places, or substances with which any further contact was not considered appropriate or desirable. In addition to the great Wessex mounds, one could note here the mounding over and ditch encircling of concentrations of occupation debris at Tye Field, Lawford, Essex (Shennan et al. 1985), Upper Ninepence, Powys (Gibson 1999), Ringlemere, Kent (Needham et al. 2006), and Avebury G55 (Smith 1965b); each a remarkable response to a particular settlement event.

Although a little unorthodox, I would like to end rather than begin with a little ethnographic analogy, simply because this may serve to ground some of the arguments presented above. In traditional Polynesian culture, much of life is regulated by the related concepts of *mana* and *tapu*. It is not easy to provide a solid definition of these (Shore 1989), but at the risk of generalisation *mana* can be seen as spiritual energy or efficacy that can reside in people, animals, places and things. It is often linked to authority and power (chiefs have *mana*), and may be inherited (i.e. deriving from an ancestral line), or come to people through achievement or contact with other powerful things or actions. It is intensely fluid, and can be lost and gained, and is made manifest through actions and events. *Tapu* is best defined as a state of extreme and potent sacredness – a state of contagious sacredness that might be a condition of *mana* – which must be carefully controlled because of its power. Again, it is not stable, and it can reside in people, places, things and events. Careful controls are put in place, including elaboration forms of segregation and wrapping, to avoid violation of *tapu*. There is no need to assume that direct equivalents of these concepts existed in the European Neolithic, but surely similar notions of spiritual power and efficacy, and the need for their harnessing and control were present, and they must have guided the way people conducted their lives. Critical though is awareness of how fluid such powers might be – how the ontological status of people, places and substances might shift – since this could help explain why seemingly ordinary places or traces of mundane events might suddenly become monumentalised.

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