

Autumn Meeting 2013

The last great monuments: ceremonial complexes of the 3rd millennium BC

Organisers: Kenny Brophy and Tim Darvill

10.30am-4.55pm Monday 4th November 2013

**The Stevenson Lecture Theatre (lowest level of the Great Court), the British Museum,
London**

NB Please organise your own refreshments on arrival and lunchtime: we only provide afternoon tea!

- 10.00 *Coffee (available for purchase at outlets in the Great Court)*
- 10.30 Welcome / introduction *Timothy Darvill*
- 10.40 *Renfrew's monuments and mobilisation 40 years on* Josh Pollard
- 11.00 *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose: Understanding the ceremonial complexes of the 3rd millennium BC in Ireland* Neil Carlin
- 11.20 *Irish Late Neolithic enclosures – rounding up the data* Steve Davis & Jessica Smyth
- 11.40 *A magical mystery tour: reconsidering the stones of Callanish, Isle of Lewis* Angela Gannon & Alison Sheridan
- 12.00 *Supermassive twins: the palisaded enclosures of Strathearn* Kenny Brophy, Gordon Noble & Dene Wright
- 12.20 *Evolution of house societies in Orkney: monuments and mythopraxis* Colin Richards
- 12.40 *Dunragit . After Durrington* Julian Thomas
- 13.00 *Lunch (make your own arrangements)*
- 14.00 *Recent work in Wharfedale* Alex Gibson & Miles Johnson
- 14.20 *Neolithic ritual in the Baldock Bowl: An unusual formative henge at Norton and its neighbours* Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews
- 14.40 *Knowlton: looking forward, looking back* John Gale
- 15.00 *Tea*
- 15.30 *The rise and fall of monumentalism in 3rd millennium BC Wessex* Dave Field, Jim Leary & Pete Marshall
- 15.50 *Tracing chalk artefact connections in prehistoric Britain* Anne Teather
- 16.10 *Ancestral geographies: the view from Durrington Walls and Stonehenge* Mike Parker Pearson
- 16.30 Discussion
- 16.55 Close
-



The last great monuments: ceremonial complexes of the 3rd millennium BC

Organisers: Kenny Brophy and Tim Darvill

Monday 4th November 2013, British Museum, London

The late Neolithic in Britain and Ireland was characterised by the construction of a series of major ceremonial complexes, consisting of extravagant monuments of timber, stone and earthworks that would have transformed the landscape and also acted as some of the major power centres of northern Europe. These awesome monuments - super-henges, timber megastructures, large mounds, massive stone circles, elaborate burial monuments as well as the activities that went on within and around them – were in a sense timeless, reflecting past and future concerns. The elaboration of earlier monuments, and the positioning of these complexes in places that were already significant from the 4th millennium (and in some cases earlier than that) suggest that in the late Neolithic major ceremonial complexes drew on the mythology and tradition of the past. Great ceremonial complexes also demonstrated mutability, being appropriated into new traditions and ideologies, straddling the transition into the Copper and Bronze Ages. These major centres, it could be argued, also represent the last flourishing of great monument construction in the British Isles – resources were channelled elsewhere as the 3rd millennium drew to an end. What can the rise and fall of these great ceremonial complexes tell us about social organisation, power structures and religious life in the 3rd millennium BC?

This day session has two main purposes. Firstly, to offer fresh perspectives on ceremonial complexes of the 3rd millennium BC drawing on a number of recent field projects as well as the analysis of legacy datasets, the development of a new chronological resolution and the establishment of a better understanding of the role and form of the material culture associated with big monuments. Secondly, speakers are invited to consider the impact of this new data on our understanding of the latter phase of the Neolithic period (and the early centuries of metal use), within the context of ongoing radical change. This session is intended not merely to be one of reporting results, but also of contextualising them: this is an opportune time to re-evaluate this period of continuity and change through the lens of the last great monuments.

Papers and abstracts

Renfrew's monuments and mobilisation 40 years on

Josh Pollard (University of Southampton)

'Colin Renfrew's 1973 paper 'Monuments and Mobilisation' remains an oft-cited work, despite being subject to much critique and having now reached its 40 birthday. In a disciplinary environment where the use-life or 'memory' of published works rarely extends beyond a couple of decades, we must ask why this classic of processual archaeology continues to provoke interest, and whether it

still contains a message we should heed. It belongs to a group of works on the British Neolithic that we might describe as 'sticky', inasmuch as they are stock references that are difficult to shake off. Tellingly, many revolve around the (re-)interpretation of the same group of monuments.'

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose: Understanding the ceremonial complexes of the 3rd millennium BC in Ireland

Neil Carlin (UCD School of Archaeology)

While there are strong similarities in the British and Irish monuments and material culture of the 3rd millennium BC, there is little to suggest that new major ceremonial complexes developed at this time in Ireland. The few large-scale monuments that are known to date from this period display a clear relationship to Middle Neolithic passage tombs at Knowth and Newgrange in the Boyne Valley, Co. Meath and Ballynahatty in the Lagan Valley, Co. Down. However, over 25 small-scale Late Neolithic wooden circular structures have been excavated across the island that do not appear to be tied to pre-existing ceremonial centres. Unfortunately, our understanding of their role in ceremonial activities is quite poor. In this talk, I will detail current understandings of activities at monument complexes in Ireland during the 3rd millennium BC and I will discuss these in relation to the architectural and depositional evidence from the wide range of contemporary Irish sites, particularly the aforementioned timber buildings. I will highlight the strong links between practices across these varying contexts to illustrate the lack of a clear divide between the ceremonial and the domestic at this time. Attention will also be drawn to the very strong evidence for continuity over the transitions between the Middle and Late and Final (metal-using) Neolithic and the notion that the 3rd millennium BC was a time of radical change will be questioned.

Late Neolithic enclosures – rounding up the data

Steve Davis (UCD School of Archaeology) & Jessica Smyth (University of Bristol)

Irish embanked enclosures—the equivalent, it is widely assumed, of British henges—have remained an enigmatic monument class within the archaeological record of the Neolithic. It is approaching 40 years since the publication of the last research excavation of an embanked enclosure in Ireland and the majority of conclusions that have been drawn since this time have relied on comparisons to British excavations or topographic survey. Over the past decade or so, a number of bodies of data have emerged from a variety of endeavours, some as a result of directly investigating the Irish Late Neolithic, others not. Archaeological mitigation along the routes of the N4 and M1 motorways, along the west and east coast of the island respectively, has seen the partial excavation of two new enclosures. LiDAR survey commissioned by Meath County Council in 2007, subsequently utilised in the Brú na Bóinne WHS Research Framework (2009) and the INSTAR Boyne River Valley Project (2008-2010), has been used in the prospection of new monuments. Since 2010, geophysical survey of eight embanked enclosures or suspected embanked enclosures in eastern Ireland has been undertaken. Lipid analysis of pottery from Balregan and Ballynahatty, part of a larger programme of analysis carried out on Irish Neolithic pottery in 2011-13, has yielded information on the use of material culture at these sites as well as new radiocarbon dates. This paper attempts to draw together all of the above new strands of evidence, re-assessing what we know, and do not know, about this distinctive form of early third millennium ceremonial activity.

A magical mystery tour: reconsidering the stones of Callanish, Isle of Lewis

Angela Gannon (RCAHMS) and Alison Sheridan (National Museum of Scotland)

With Patrick Ashmore's major publication on his 1980s excavations at Callanish soon to go to press, and Colin Richards' *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North* about to appear, this paper offers a timely and considered review of one of Scotland's most magnificent megalithic monuments in the light of recent fieldwork on the Western Isles by the RCAHMS. Standing on a rocky ridge overlooking Loch Roag, the circle, avenue and alignments of Callanish have been a focus of ritual life for late Neolithic communities and their descendants living in the Western Isles, and still form an awe-inspiring sight, especially as silhouettes on a moody Hebridean skyline. Further, they are at the heart of a complex of ceremonial monuments comprising at least another three stone circles, a number of arcs and alignments, as well as several solitary standing stones.

This paper sets out to contextualise the monument, both within the social and ideological dynamics of the communities responsible for its initial construction and subsequent modification (and their counterparts on a broader, national scale), and in terms of the other sites and monuments in the area that are likely to have been contemporary with it. Using insights gained from thematic record enhancement by the RCAHMS, we ask: just how much do we understand about the people who built and used this monument and others nearby, and how can we set out to improve that understanding? In other words, what questions do we now need to ask, and what approach should be taken to find the answers? This contribution seeks both to complement and to herald Ashmore's and Richards' *magna opera*.

Supermassive twins. The late Neolithic timber palisaded enclosures of Strathearn

Kenny Brophy (University of Glasgow), Gordon Noble (University of Aberdeen) & Dene Wright (University of Glasgow)

Since, 2007, we have carried out six seasons of excavations at the twin timber palisaded enclosures at Forteviot and Leadketty, in Strathearn, Perth and Kinross, central Scotland. This work has taken place as part of the SERF Project (Strathearn Environs & Royal Forteviot Project). These huge enclosures, just 4km apart, were both discovered as cropmarks in the 1970s. Our investigations suggest that both were built in the late Neolithic, and were defined by a boundary of large oak posts. Yes despite sharing many similarities, these two megastructures but also display marked and significant differences in terms of the boundaries, internal activities, depositional strategies and function. These are places that seem to have had very different trajectories, and yet were bound together by a shared emphasis on massive timber monumentality towards the end of the Neolithic. We will also report on excavations in summer 2013, which shed more light on the differential role these two locations may have played in prehistory.

Evolution of house societies in Orkney: monuments and mythopraxis

Colin Richards (University of Manchester)

In this paper I will chart the changing nature of habitation in Orkney through the late fourth and early third millennium cal BC in terms of the development of house societies. The great monuments of the early third millennium will be examined as part of this process with particular reference to the

role of skins and membranes in their architecture and appearance. Moreover, by drawing on ideas of mythopraxis and mythologization I will attempt to place them in a broader context of shifting social identities in northern Britain and Ireland.

Dunragit. After Durrington

Julian Thomas (University of Manchester)

The excavation of the Late Neolithic palisaded enclosure at Dunragit in Gallowa took place a decade ago, and should hopefully be reaching publication later this year. Over the past ten years, our understanding of Late Neolithic domestic and ceremonial architecture has been transformed, not least by the work of the Stonehenge Riverside Project, which I've been fortunate enough to be involved with.

Recent work in Wharfedale

Alex Gibson (University of Bradford) & Miles Johnson (Yorkshire Dales NP)

The small penannular up-land henge monument at Yarnbury, near Grassington in the Yorkshire Dales is well known in the archaeological literature but it is often regarded as a head water henge, very much remote in the uplands of the Pennines. Recent Lidar and geophysical survey in Wharfedale shows, however, that it is not alone. This lecture will introduce some new research into the Neolithic archaeology of Wharfedale.

Neolithic ritual in the Baldock Bowl: An unusual formative henge at Norton and its neighbours

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews (North Hertfordshire Museums)

The Baldock Bowl is a small hollow in the north-eastern extremity of the Chilterns, which contains a rich array of Neolithic sites, unusual in Hertfordshire. A key feature in the development of this landscape is a recently recognised formative henge at Norton, Letchworth Garden City. Its circular outer ditch is only 55 m in diameter and the bank constructed inside it sealed at least three plank-built structures. After a period of abandonment, a secondary horseshoe-shaped ditch was cut inside the bank and material removed from the inner face of the original bank was used to construct a small bank on the inner edge of the ditch, into which at least one post was inserted. Around the same time, the cremated remains of two children and at least one adult were deposited in a pit at the centre of the monument. The different phases of activity are contemporary with other sites in the Baldock Bowl. While some are ritual in character, others are domestic and include a Middle Neolithic structure at Baldock. This concentration of fourth- and third-millennium activity makes this cluster of hitherto poorly known sites a landscape of considerable local significance.

Knowlton: looking forward, looking back

John Gale (Bournemouth University)

The Henge monuments of the British Isles still represent a rather enigmatic loose collective of earthworks that date to the latter half of the 3rd millennium BC. Recent work on some of the larger monuments located in the south of the UK, most notably at Durrington Walls, Wiltshire have revealed some insights into pre-henge activity and settlement, but still an overarching theme of

purpose for the monuments themselves is limited to a general vagueness under the enduring banner of 'ceremonial' activity.

Two campaigns of excavation and field survey (1993-4; 2002-8) undertaken at the Henge complex at Knowlton in east Dorset, and perhaps more importantly at the group of barrow cemeteries found in the same river valley would seem to indicate that whatever the monuments represented at the time of construction they may have evolved to become major focal centres for later developing funerary complexes. This theme has of course been identified elsewhere in Wessex and beyond, but details on the mechanisms, circumstances and durability of this relationship are little understood.

The grouping of barrows within the valley, in which the Knowlton Henge complex lies, although badly affected by aggressive farming regimes over the intervening centuries, does provide sufficient evidence to provide some interesting insights into the determination of place for the location and articulation of burial monuments within both the wider landscape and also within cemeteries themselves. That these funerary complexes may be preceded by settlement activity that is likely to be contemporary with the building of the henges themselves (as has been the case in this study) merely serves to highlight that the way forward in understanding the function of henges may be achieved through looking beyond them, both in space and in time.

The rise and fall of monumentalism in 3rd millennium BC Wessex

Dave Field, Jim Leary (University of Reading) & Pete Marshall (English Heritage)

The great monuments of Late Neolithic Wessex appear to mark the culmination of a long standing tradition of earth movement that can be traced back for more than a millennium. While dating certainly remains problematic, recent programmes have allowed the chronology of many of these sites to be assessed in greater detail and the relationship between them evaluated. The lengthy gestation of many monuments could indicate a more intermittent, even piecemeal construction, than the neat architectural blueprint established by antiquaries. While the latter conjures images of designed and completed building projects, the former may allow an insight into some of the processes involved. The construction of monuments can thus be placed on a more human level. This paper describes how recent work by English Heritage at Stonehenge, Avebury, Marden, Silbury Hill, Marlborough Mound and elsewhere has contributed to our knowledge of the relationship of these sites.

Tracing chalk artefact connections in prehistoric Britain

Anne Teather (British Women Archaeologists)

Recent work conducted by the Stonehenge Riverside Project in the environs of prehistoric monuments in Wiltshire has yielded one of the few securely dated chalk artefact assemblages in Britain. This has allowed a reappraisal of chalk art and artefacts in general, providing new insights into the chronology of chalk artefacts and testifying to their longevity in prehistoric Britain. This paper presents case studies that demonstrate how regional connections can be strengthened through the medium of symbolic artefact forms, and how certain chalk artefacts were transformed in both form and depositional context from the early to late Neolithic and into the Bronze Age. It is argued that chalk artefacts were part of a belief system that underpinned both ritual and everyday life in the Neolithic of southern Britain on the chalk. Moreover, their longevity in deliberate depositional contexts suggests that, in contrast to changing monument forms and evolving ceramic

styles, some chalk artefacts forms were surprisingly static through time, indicating a continuity in belief systems despite evident changes in monuments styles throughout the Neolithic and into the Bronze Age.

Ancestral geographies: the view from Durrington Walls and Stonehenge

Mike Parker Pearson (UCL)

Neolithic ceremonial complexes have sometimes been thought of as central places, an idea established by Colin Renfrew in the 1970s. Yet more recent research and synthesis in different parts of Britain by David Field, Gill Hey, Kenny Brophy and Gordon Noble, among many others, has highlighted instances in which they were located not within but between regions, often on routeways and/or riversides. Such locations might be considered neutral or liminal zones - interstitial places - where disputes between territorial groups could be settled and alliances forged through gatherings, labour mobilization and feasting. Some of these places appear to have had deep-rooted cultural and natural significance, making them suitable locales for successive and varied forms of monument building and large-scale gathering. New high-precision radiocarbon chronologies are revealing that, as well as synchronous episodes of construction in different inter-regions, there were also instances of eclipsing of one complex by another. This paper will examine such issues with particular reference to Durrington Walls and Stonehenge.