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Late Neolithic Henge Monuments as Foci for Evolving Funerary Landscapes: Knowlton Henge Complex and the Barrow Cemeteries of the Allen Valley, Dorset, UK – A Case Study

Henge; round barrows; Knowlton; funerary landscapes; dolines; aerial photography; geophysics.

Introduction

The ‘classic’ henge monuments of the British Isles (circular earthworks with a bank, internal ditch and either one or two entrances) still represent a rather enigmatic collective of mega structures that appear to largely date from around the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. That they both individually and collectively represent a society that was centralised, possibly around chiefly elites¹ is highly likely. However, when we come to consider the original function of such monuments we have to be more circumspect and proceed on a case by case basis. Most commentators today acknowledge the view that such structures were conceived as ‘ritual’ centres within a likely complex social and religious order of the time, although evidential detail is for the most part lacking. Interpretation is consequentially largely inferred, attributable more to the lack of settlement proxies in the archaeological record rather than any definitive or specific evidence for ‘ritual’ activity.

To gain a better understanding of such monuments, it has been necessary for archaeologists to look more closely at the wider landscape settings in which they sit, and several studies have drawn in associated monuments as well as natural landscape features.² All of which tend to re-affirm the interpretations of henges as focal centres for ‘ritual’ activity that hint towards landscapes that are well defined and part of the extant societies evolving cosmological order no doubt reflective of the evolving localised belief systems of the time.

A number of such ‘ritual landscapes’ in the British Isles have been examined in recent years; most notably the landscape of Stonehenge.³ Amongst the many research threads identified in such studies there is the frequent presence of apparently associated funerary monuments in such landscapes, dominated by the earthen round barrow. Around Stonehenge alone, the quantity of such barrows is quite staggering with a 1970 estimate of 25 barrows per square mile based upon the 12 square miles surrounding Stonehenge itself.⁴

The presence of such large numbers of funerary monuments in close proximity clearly establishes a link with the monument at Stonehenge itself but what is less well understood is the ‘nature’ or meaning behind the linkage and perhaps more importantly how this developed over time. Such a factor attracts greater significance when one considers the length of time that may have evolved between the construction of the first round barrow

1 Harding 2003, 9.

2 Barrett 1988; Parker Pearson 2000; Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998; Richards 1996; Woodward and Woodward 1996; Cummings 2008.

3 Cleal, Walker, and Montague 1995; Darvill 1997; Darvill 2006.

4 Historical Monuments 1970, 427.

and the last. Given the possibility of round barrows having been constructed as early as 2500 BC and as late as 1500 BC, it would be surprising if the rationale behind the initial deposit and all that it meant or inferred about society and its belief systems did not substantially change by the end of the sequence. Certainly the landscape that was extant in the post Bronze Age period around the Stonehenge landscape was a 'developed' landscape reflecting a ritual dynamic that may have been substantially different in concept and meaning than the one intended by the builders of the first barrows perhaps a thousand years later. It is equally possible that the purpose and utility of the stone and earthwork monument at the heart of this landscape was conceptually changed when it was adopted by the first barrow builders.

Case Study: Knowlton Henge Complex and the Barrow Groups of the Allen Valley

The Knowlton Henge complex is one of a relatively small but important group of major henge monuments that occupies the Wessex chalklands of southern England (group also includes: Avebury, Marden, Durrington Walls, Stonehenge and Mount Pleasant). Located in the east of the county of Dorset the complex lies in an area known as Cranborne Chase which contains one of the densest concentrations of Neolithic and Bronze earthworks in north-western Europe. Although the Cranborne Chase area has been extensively studied in recent years⁵ the henge complex at Knowlton and the river valley within which it resides has only recently attracted any significant archaeological investigation.

Knowlton is relatively unusual as it comprises a number of large circular enclosures in close proximity to each other. Two are certainly henges in a 'classic' sense (the southern and central enclosures), the third (the northern) is less well understood but appears to have an internal ditch and until further investigated can be similarly classified.⁶ All three enclosures occupy a low spur of land on the gently sloping eastern side of the Allen Valley relatively close to the River Allen's source at Wimborne St Giles.

Only the southern henge has been subjected to any intrusive examination and a small trench excavated through its bank and ditch in 1994 revealed a deep enclosure ditch (5.1m in depth) with a barely surviving external bank. The excavations produced no evidence to indicate settlement activity, but a radio carbon determination provided a date of 2570–2190 BC (3890±60 BP: Beta 141096) from a primary fill of the henge ditch.

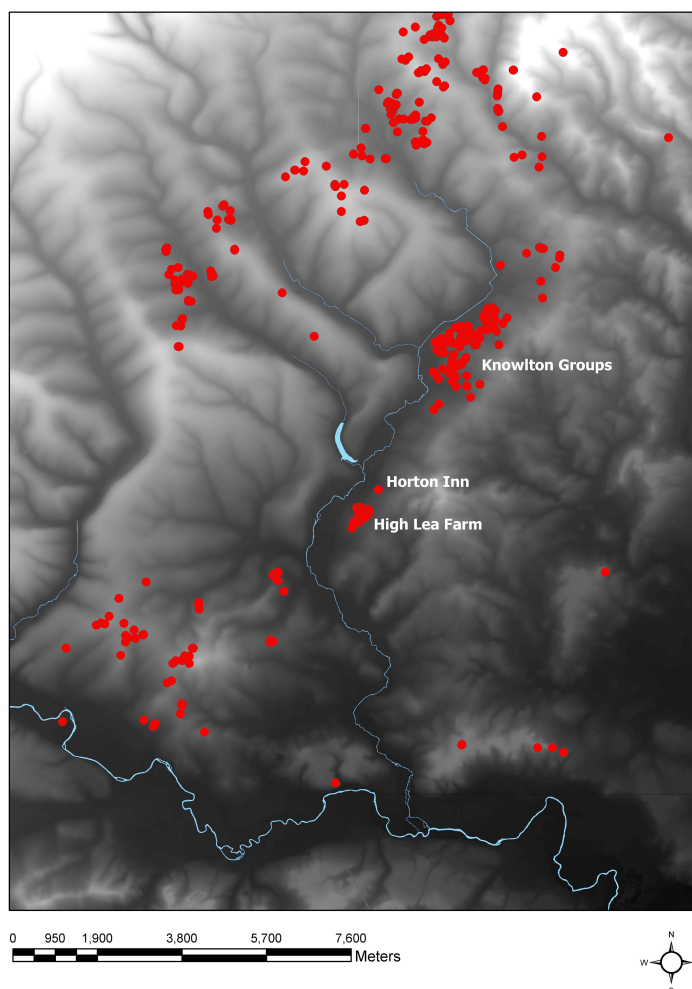
Surrounding the three henge monuments are the remains of extensive barrow cemeteries, now unfortunately largely erased by years of agricultural attrition, but a programme of aerial photographic transposition by the Aerial Photographic section of the Royal Commission in 2000 revealed a dense concentration of ring ditches and round mounds (178) within a 1.5km radius of the central henge. The concentration of funerary monuments comprises at least three basic clusters lying at the centre, to the north and to the south of the henge complex and are clearly directly articulated to it.

However, when we look further afield for the presence of additional funerary monuments within the Allen valley we see that they are largely restricted to groupings along the river valley to the south-west (Fig. 1) with two defined concentrations at Horton Inn and High Lea Farm. Both concentrations are similarly badly damaged by agricultural attrition and the known population of monuments is certainly significantly less than would have been originally constructed. Both of these barrow groupings appear to largely occupy the eastern bank of the river which seems to be a deliberate act, maintained throughout the 'life' of each cemetery. Clearly the river was not only a physical artery coursing through

5 Barret, Bradley, and Green 1991.

6 Gale 2003, 162.

Fig. 1 | The distribution of Round Barrows in the Allen Valley (and surrounding area), Dorset, UK (based upon data drawn from the National Monument Record archive). N.B. The single dot at Horton Inn does not faithfully represent the total population of barrows (ring-ditches) which have yet to be transcribed. There are at least 7 ring ditches within the group and probably more.



the landscape but was also a demarcation boundary restricting the deposition of the dead in this case to one side only. It is tempting to view the east bank of the river valley and the henge complex as a domain of the ancestors, a defined area not unlike in part (and in concept at least) that suggested by Parker Pearson⁷ for Stonehenge. The river itself may of course have acted as a conduit where the dead were transported from a domain of the living but it is open to speculation as to where such a place might have been.

Fieldwork within the Allen Valley has in recent years been conducted at the southernmost barrow group—High Lea Farm.⁸ A programme of field survey and excavation at this little known grouping of barrows and ring-ditches has started to reveal some interesting features that throw some new light about the complexities of choice facing Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age societies in dealing with their newly dead which are briefly outlined below. A combination of aerial photographic transcription and geophysical prospection undertaken between 2003–2006 revealed an astonishing concentration of ring ditches including both clustered and linear groupings with the majority associated with an easily identified ‘founder barrow’ at the heart of the group (Fig. 2).

The most complete barrow of those excavated, revealed a complex burial rite with a pre-barrow mortuary enclosure and primary burial in a rectangular pit that aligned perfectly with the axis of its corresponding linear alignment. This re-enforcement of

7 Parker Pearson 2000, 203–207.

8 Gale et al. 2004; Gale, Laver, and Russell 2007; Gale, Hewitt, and Russell 2008.

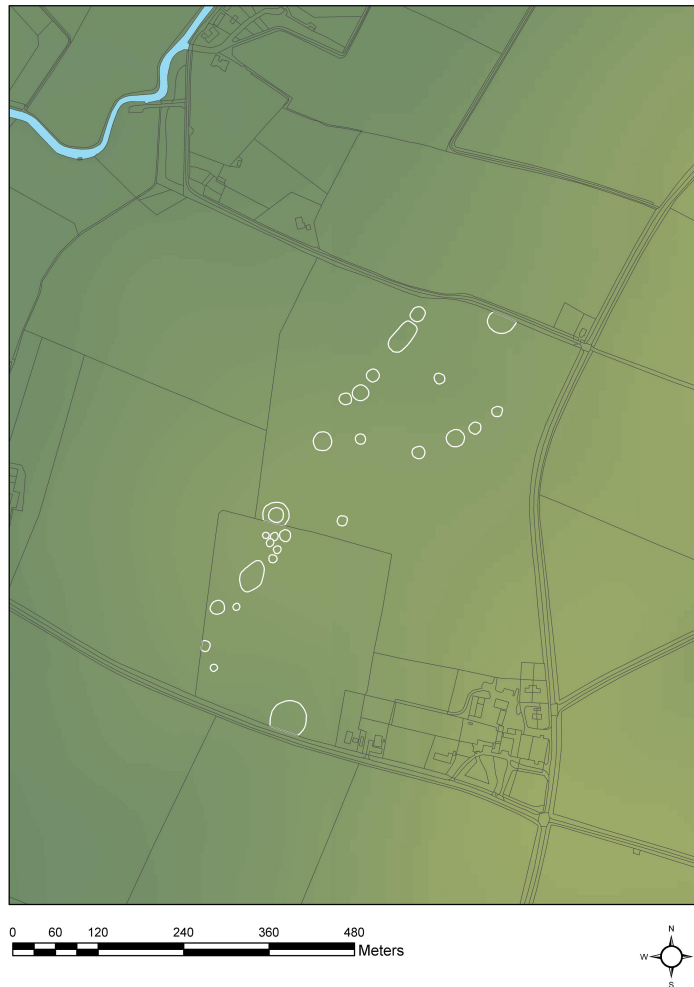


Fig. 2 | High Lea Farm Barrow Group, Allen Valley, Dorset, UK. Data transcribed from geophysical data plots. The 'founder barrow' is that defined by the double concentric ditched ring ditch towards the centre of the figure drawing.

the alignment surely emphasises its significance and importance particularly as it also aligned with the likely entrance to the mortuary enclosure—but in this case pointing back towards the founder barrow to the south-west.

Perhaps the most beguiling of the factors concerning choice of location revealed by the fieldwork concerns the individual locations of the barrow groupings. At every location (High Lea Farm, Horton Inn, Knowlton South, Knowlton Central and Knowlton North) the barrows/ring ditches are located in close proximity to Dolines (sinkholes). Indeed the Henge complex itself is located close to Dolines. Whilst the Dolines are rarely visible at ground surface today (where the topography has been smoothed by the passage of time and aggressive agricultural activity), it is likely that they would have been visible in the 3rd millennia BC. Elsewhere in Dorset the co-location of Barrows with Dolines has been previously noted by Tilley⁹ and others.¹⁰ That the Dolines might have been viewed by contemporary Bronze Age society as conduits to a chthonic other world where the close placing of the dead at such places might have eased their transition between such states is a tempting interpretation. In such circumstances it is also likely that the location would have continued to be utilised by the living as contact points to the ancestors in a cosmological order that rationalised the circle of life and death and allowed for the subsequent observance of necessary rituals.

⁹ Tilley 2010, 187–245.

¹⁰ Woodward 2000, 125.

In conclusion it is clear that the choices faced by society as to the place of burial for its significant dead during the period 2500 BC–1500 BC involved an adherence to a tradition which incorporated the natural and cultural features of a landscape but would have also been subject to adaption and development over the centuries in which it continued in use. Such mega structures as Late Neolithic henges were chosen as foci for burial, but only as part of a complex and developing set of associated social and religious beliefs.

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