

**Joint Prehistoric Society/Norfolk & Norwich Archaeological Society Lecture  
5<sup>th</sup> October 2013 at the Castle, Norwich: 'Do henges exist? A skeptical view'  
by Dr. Alex Gibson, Reader at the University of Bradford**

A provocative question posed by Dr. Gibson to an audience of over seventy people. He began with a short history of the term, its definition and usage, providing numerous examples of authors and sites. He then considered the problem of classification and categories and the confusion about origins, activities, chronology and date confirmation.

The essential characteristic of Neolithic earthworks loosely called "hengesh" is a structure with a ditch inside an earthen ring bank. Access is by way of entrances through the earthwork and the interior may include a range of different structures. The term was first used by Thomas D. Kendrick, in his *Archaeology in England & Wales* 1932. Since then "henge" has been applied to an ever increasing number of sites with enclosures of earth, wood and stone, and internal features including timber or stone circles, post rings, stone monoliths, standing posts, pits, coves, mounds, burials, etc. Dr Gibson felt such loose application to a wide variety of diverse monuments has "made henges a loaded term" and redundant.

Sir Graham Douglas Clarke was the first to define three classes of henge based on a definition of a roughly circular or oval-shaped external bank with an internal ditch surrounding a central area of more than 20 metres in diameter containing stones or posts:

Class I single entrance created from a gap in the bank; Class II two entrances diametrically opposite one another; Class III four entrances facing each other in pairs. This gave 20 probable sites for ritual/ceremonial purposes and dedicatory burials but with no evidence of occupation. They include Arminghall in Norfolk although Avebury is the classic example whilst Stonehenge itself is atypical in that has a ditch outside the main earthwork bank.



Avebury



Arbor Low

In 1951 Robert Atkinson's synthesis 'The Henge Monuments' considered the word redundant – only Stonehenge with its lintel structure deserved the name but 'hengesh' had its uses so he retained the term for classification = 36 sites [13 with one entrance; 17 with two entrances and 6 with double ditches and two entrances]. Other archaeologists had their doubts about certain sites which continued to be added. Aubrey Burl in *Regional synthesis of henge monuments* published in the *Archaeological Journal* in 1969 listed 78 sites and was the first person to look in detail at eleven

regional groups. He felt scale wasn't the important issue and that the presence of uprights was misleading in terms of the definition.

In 1969 Geoff Wainwright's *Review of henge monuments* introduced the term 'hengi-form' to describe small henge-like monuments (now defined by the Monuments Protection Programme as a roughly circular area of ground typically between 5m and 20m internal diameter, which is enclosed within a modest earthwork comprising a ditch with an external bank. They may have one entrance or two opposing entrances. Within the enclosure may be pits, cremation pits, postholes, stone-sockets and graves). Using aerial photography Wainwright added 31 extra places; applying the term to cremation sites such as Whitestones Moor, Totley Moor and Alnham. Hence they are currently interpreted as having a ritual or ceremonial purpose, in most cases closely connected with burial during the late Neolithic. However, this only adds to the confusion since "hengi-form monuments" are similar in size and shape to bowl barrows, bell barrows, mortuary enclosures, stone hut circles, mounds, and prehistoric round houses. Moreover we now have "henge-like enclosures" - an irregular outline comprising a ring earthwork with ditch inside the bank and the central area of more than 300m in diameter showing evidence of occupation, i.e. Durrington Walls.



Without clear distinctions there now exists a confusion of henges and ring ditches, circles and hengi-forms. In 1986 Tom Clare felt the perimeter is the primary classification, i.e. entrances were the most useful tool of classification. However, A.F. Harding & G.E. Lee in *Henge Monuments and Related Sites* 1987 said it was too broad a category and decided on strict adherence to Atkinson so effectively axing Wainwright's categorisation. This meant only 20 sites plus 20 unexcavated ones. Dr. Gibson felt classification by morphology is dangerous. There is no consensus of definition/description: simply many sites with different forms. Using sketch pictures and photographs he showed numerous examples of these sites. Their huge variety in size, shape, entrance, ditch, bank, stone or wood circle, demonstrates development over a long period of time.



Woodhenge, for example, shows lots of additions and sequences of changes at different phases – such as the densely packed six rings of postholes with the ditches being later modification.

Part of the problem is the origin of such sites. In 1939 Stuart Piggott thought they were connected to beaker people, and Atkinson felt their use stretched to the Bronze Age, but now they are considered to start in the Neolithic around 3600-3000BC. Where did the concept come from? Much earlier circles on the Continent such as Goseck circle (which has no bank) and later ones such as Goloring are not seen as proper “hengés”. Similarly the rondel enclosures of Bavaria’s Isar Valley, whilst comparable, are more like a midway point between a henge and a causewayed enclosure. Since “hengés” are concentrated over much of Britain, English authors have stressed island continuity with no one source for all the features. However, attempts to prove origin and continuity have not been conclusive since chronological overlap makes it difficult to demonstrate a coherent tradition.

Also the purpose of such sites. Piggott said they were a product of lowland culture, built on flat ground often close to watercourses, in good agricultural landscapes. Wainwright favoured feasting and ritual, exchange and social discourse. The current interpretation is as ritual or ceremonial monuments, meeting venues, centres for trade, or some sort of sacred activity, but there is no agreement about actual usage and no idea about a uniform set of beliefs and rituals.

Chronology is a major problem - confusion exists over dating both the original construction and activities as well as their relationship to other monuments in the landscape. The question of how to date relates back to what is a “henge” and the choice of site. In the three classes of henge the consistent feature is the ditch and circularity but without human detritus, radio-carbon dating of organic remains such as animal bone and oak charcoal have provided dates of poor integrity and are far from secure. For instance there are a wide range of dates for Class I and II henges with fundamental differences between them: radio-carbon dating showed long lived continuity 3500BC to AD700 for single entrance sites but much shorter 2500-1000 BC for double entrance sites. Speculative identification for dating has resulted in hypothetical views and raised issues which are not easily resolved.

The problem is that “henge” has nostalgic overtones and connections plus a wide usage but shoe-horning everything into one term when there are inadequate dates, descriptions and classifications, is not good archaeology. Stuart and C.M.Piggott in *Stone and Earth Circles in Dorset* advocated

“hengese” be put to rest. Dr. Gibson concurred advocating the abandonment of the term and replacing it with stone circles and timber circles.

The President, Helen Patterson, thanked Dr. Gibson for his excellent and detailed lecture, fully illustrated with photographs and diagrams of numerous sites in Britain.

An expanded version of the lecture can be found in:

Gibson, A.M. 2012. An Introduction to the Study of Henges: Time for a Change? In. A. Gibson (ed) *Enclosing the Neolithic. Recent Studies in Britain and Europe*, 1-20. BAR International Series 2440. Oxford: Archaeopress

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