BATH & CAMERTON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Observations of Possible Megalithic Structures in the Valley of Stones, Little Bredy, Dorset

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Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society, 2012

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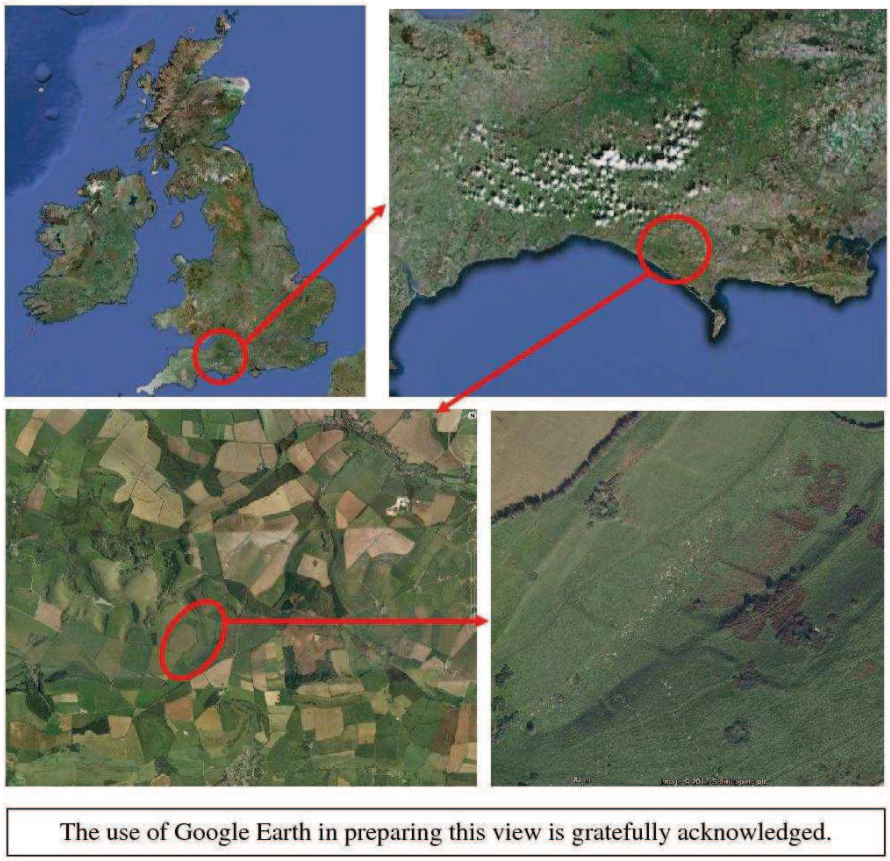
1 Introduction

1.1 Location

The Valley of Stones lies in the southern part of the parish of Little Bredy, Dorset. It is a dry valley, which descends north-east before turning north-west towards Bridehead Lake, and below that, the River Bride. It is centred on SY 596873. Location is shown in figure 1.

The geology is upper chalk (Chaffey, 2004, p43 - 44). The ground surface here is strewn with sarsens, very tough sandstones of various sizes and varied composition, with textures ranging from fine to conglomerates of cobbles.

There are extensive prehistoric field systems clearly visible throughout the upper valley, including the valley bottom.



The use of Google Earth in preparing this view is gratefully acknowledged.

Figure 1.1 Location of the Valley of Stones.

1.2 Scope

This report details only casual observations in the field, aided by no more than compass, camera, scale and tape measure. No formal surveying has been undertaken. The purpose of this report is draw attention to some stone assemblages, which may be worthy of detailed survey, and be found to be man-made rather than natural.

The Valley of Stones and its environs also contain particularly fine groups of 'Celtic' prehistoric fields. There is no study of those in this document, except where they may be relevant to the stone settings.

The author is grateful to Natural England for having set the Valley of Stones National Nature Reserve as open access land, and recognises that the valley is a site of special scientific interest (SSSI). The valley is also a scheduled monument under the jurisdiction of English Heritage. This study does not go beyond work permitted without need for licence.

The use of Google Earth in preparing plans is gratefully acknowledged, particularly figures 1.1 and 2.2.

Tim Lunt prepared figure 3.1.

2 The structures

2.1 The Three Possible Structures

Given the number of boulders strewn naturally over the valley sides and bottom, it is impossible without very close investigation to be sure that the features to be described are not natural arrangements, but they need to be recorded. All three described here are right down in the valley bottom.

The first appears to be a kerb circle of small boulders, contiguous in places but with interruptions, which form three quadrants of an approximate circle.

The second appears to be a tumbled portal, similar in form but smaller than, that at the long barrow at Lugbury, Wiltshire.

The third is a semi-circle of small stones. It may be the feature described by Lewis (1882), being central within the scatter of stones. This may be just a pattern formed fortuitously by stones in their natural positions. It is centred on SY 59610 87342. It has not been studied in any detail, but it is shown in figure 2.1. It will not be considered further in this study.

Figure 2.1. Semi-circle of stones which may form a man-made feature (3rd structure).

2.2 Structure 1

Structure 1 is an arc of stones to the south-east of the main stone clutter, extending for nearly a semi-circle. This is visible on Google Earth, 2002, (this is used in the fourth part of figure 1.1) and is shown below in figure 2.2 at a greater scale.

Figure 2.2. Overhead view of the valley from Google Earth. Arrow points to circle.

The feature described here appears to be substantially a kerb circle, approximately 22 m in diameter. It is centred on SY 59667 87389. Its shape is not regular, and the north-west quadrant is not clear. There are possible toppled stones continuing the arc in this quadrant at a radius of about 15 m. There is a possible portion of a kerb visible, but it is only 7 m from the centre.

Figure 2.3 shows a closer photograph of the feature, seen from above on the south valley side. The second part of the figure shows the feature annotated with a red curve for clarification [1]. Item [2] shown in this figure is the second feature, to be described later. The relationship between the two features can be seen here.

Figure 2.3. The kerb circle (annotated [1] in the lower picture. This figure also shows the second feature [2] and its proximity to this feature.

Its possible outline is shown in figure 2.4. In the north-west quadrant, the circle has been assumed to follow the outer radius described above. The possible inner kerb is also marked.

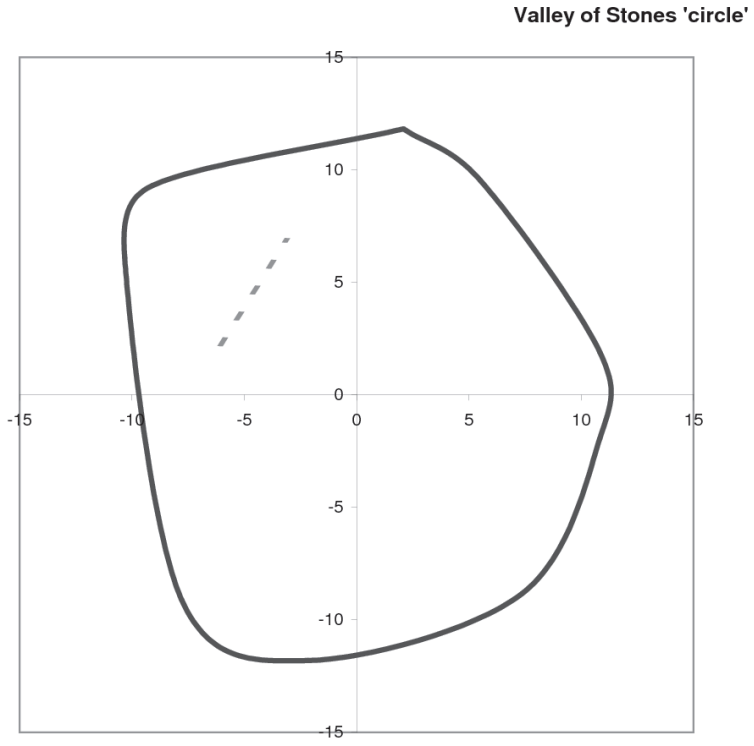


Figure 2.4. Approximate dimensions of the kerb circle. Measurements are in metres. The pecked line shows a kerb in the north-west quadrant which may also be a man-made feature.

This feature has previously been photographed and commented on by Ponting (2003), and Haddon (nd).

It is right down on the valley floor and is much overlooked by both north-west and south-east sides of the valley. To the south-west, the valley rises to its head. To the north-east, the valley turns sharply, so that valley side only is visible from here. The skyline is always well above the monument, and on some bearings, the angle of elevation to the horizon is large. Figure 2.5 shows the altitude (in degrees) of the horizon from the circle centre.

Figure 2.6 shows four photographs of the kerb circle stones at approximate bearings east, south – east, south and south - west.

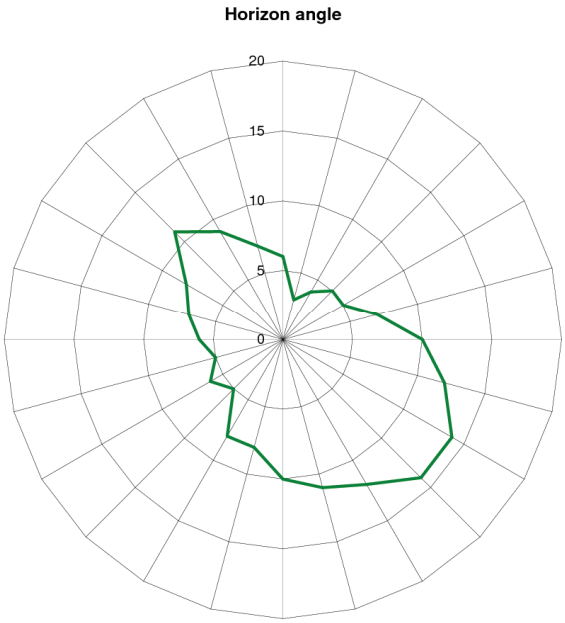


Figure 2.5. Altitude of horizon vs direction from centre of circle. At all points, the horizon is well above the circle, and is particularly so towards the south – east.

Figure 2.6. Four views of the stones of the kerb circle, taken from the centre, pointing north – east, east, south and south – west respectively. The scale is 1 m in 1,3 and 4, half metre in 2.

2.3 Structure 2.

Some 30 m to the north of the centre of Structure 1 is a stone setting reminiscent of a portal of a megalithic tomb, notably that at Lugbury, Wiltshire, which is illustrated in 2.7.

Figure 2.7. The megalithic portal which remains at Lugbury, Wiltshire.

Structure 2 comprises a large slab which leans to the east. It is not recumbent because a portion has fallen off, and the bulk of the stone rests on this. To either side are stones which could have been the uprights originally supporting the slab. A stone on the south of this group is smooth and has water-filled depressions, possibly cut cup marks. The proximity of this to structure 1 was shown in figure 2.3.

The Structure is illustrated in figure 2.8.

There is no evidence of a mound or chamber behind it, to the west, as there is for instance at the nearby Grey Mare and her Colts, but the ground nearby has been disturbed even in prehistoric times, with a prehistoric field bank only a few metres to the west. This can be seen in the top two pictures in figure 2.8.

Figure 2.8. Structure 3. The blocking stone leans, and rests on a broken – off portion while possible support stones to the sides lean outwards. There are possible cup marks in the stone to the south (fourth picture, and far left of third picture).

3 Comment

There have been previous suggestions of megalithic structures within the natural scatter in the Valley of the Stones, but there does not seem to have been any systematic fieldwork.

Within the valley, it would be extremely difficult to distinguish between man-made arrangements and natural scatters, but the valley is considered to be the source of stones for a number of local monuments. These include the Grey Mare and her Colts, the Hellstone and possible remains of chambered tombs in Winterborne Steepleton (RCHM,1970) and West Compton (RCHM, 1952) parishes, the Kingston Russell, Hampton Down and Winterbourne Abbas stone circles, and possibly the lone megaliths, the Broad Stone, and a leaning stone near North Barn Farm. These are all shown in figure 3.1. A possible other stone circle site at Hangman's Rocks (Bailey, 1984) is also shown. A number of these and some other sites, now lost, were described in Warne (1872), Piggott and Piggot (1939) and Gale (2003). The site marked 'Piggots' in figure 3.1 is a hilltop earthwork circle with one remaining standing stone described in 1939 but now missing. A second circle nearby containing a timber structure was excavated in 1974 (Catherall, 1976).

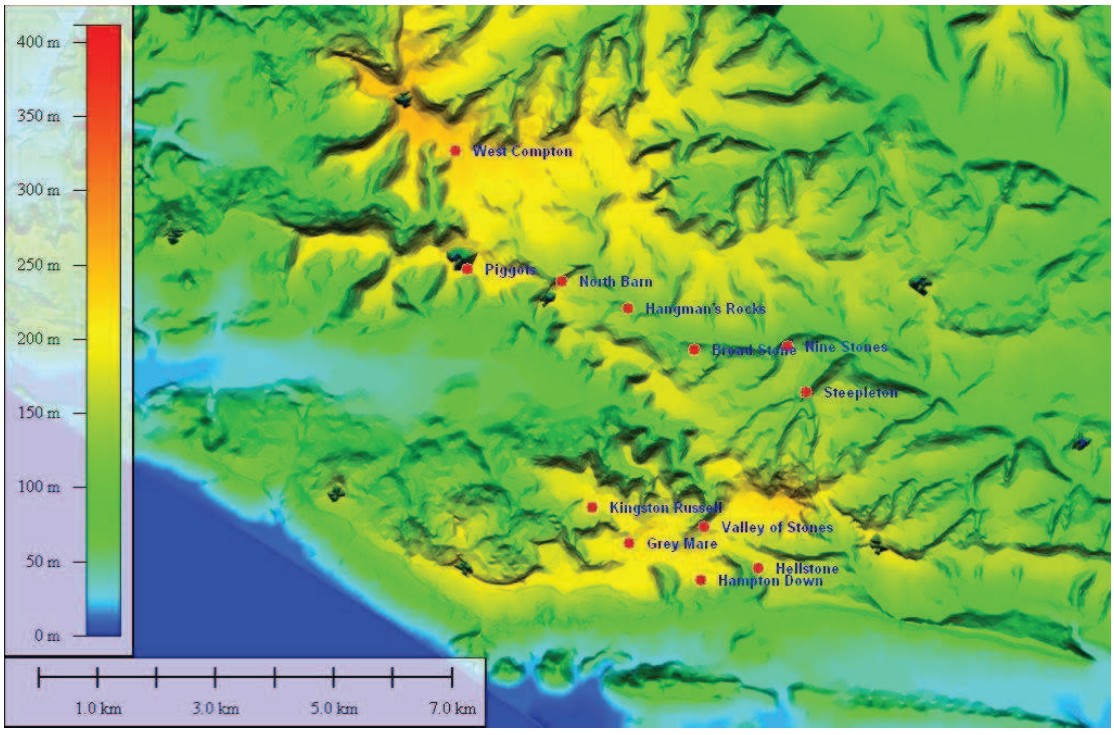


Figure 3.1. Location of the megalithic sites west of Dorchester.

The features are deep within a valley, overlooked from all directions, so there could be no mystery in activity connected with them and very limited view of any astronomical events. The position is somewhat analogous to that of the Nine Stones in Winterbourne Abbas (see figure 3.2) although that is now hidden in trees. The lone megaliths and Hangman's Rocks are also deep in the valley, so this may be a local specialty, with the Kingston Russell and Hampton Down circles being the oddities. The Grey Mare, Hellstone and the West Compton structures are also hilltop sites, and the Steepleton structure is up on a valley side. Structure 2 does not therefore fit well within the category.

Figure 3.2. The Nine Stones at Winterbourne Abbas, a site deep within its valley.

Perhaps in Dorset, the earthen long barrows should also be included in any consideration as the stones are a rarity amongst the chalk monuments, but even these tend to be in prominent places rather than secluded but overlooked localities.

Structure 1 is almost certainly man-made. It is too big to be a domestic structure. Its form is more that of a kerb circle, a form quite common on Dartmoor (Burl, 2005). It is well defined for three quadrants, but the

north-west is a jumble of boulders, most of which are probably in natural positions. Structure 2 could be natural, but the attitudes of the stones suggest that they are not lying in untouched positions. Lack of any signs of structure behind it, and its situation deep in a valley do not associate it with analogous structures.

It would require much more extensive fieldwork, including possibly earthwork and geophysical survey, and ultimately trial excavation, to provide definate evidence that the features described here are man-made. That is well beyond the scope of this exercise.

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