

***The Excavation of a Timber Circle
at
Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled, Welshpool,
Nov 1990 - Feb 1991.***

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Excavation of a timber circle at Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled, Welshpool, Nov 1990 - Feb 1991.

The pit circle at Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled was discovered by St Joseph in 1975 and published by him in 1980. It comprised 20 pits arranged in a circle 20m in diameter. A large central pit, apparently 5m across, was visible on the photographs. The site lies on a gravel tongue which sticks out into the flood plain of the River Severn. It forms one component of a complex of circular monuments at the NE terminal of the Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled (Welshpool) cursus (fig 1). In addition to the pit circle, there is a large, circular ditched enclosure, two ring ditches and a small penannular enclosure. Two further barrows lie to the north and south of the site and Beaker pottery has been recovered from the ploughsoil in the field to the north of the cursus, behind the houses at Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled.

The pit circle lies on the agreed route of the Welshpool by-pass, the construction of which is scheduled for the autumn 1991. Accordingly rescue excavations were mounted by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust and financed by Welsh Office Highways. The excavations lasted from November 1990 until February 1991. Approximately 1.2Ha of topsoil was removed and the area cleaned by hand to examine the gravel surface in the vicinity of the circle to try and detect associated external features.



Fig 1: The cursus complex at Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled.

The excavation proved the site to be a double timber circle comprising an outer circle 20m in diameter and an inner circle 5m in diameter (fig 2). The outer circle was composed of 20 post pits averaging c.1.10m deep. In all instances post-pipes were observed and charcoal recovered. The quantities of charcoal were small, however, suggesting that the below-ground portions of the posts had been charred but that the site had not burned down, rather rotted *in situ*. The posts of this outer ring were c.30-40cm in diameter in all pits bar two in the SW arc of the circle. These pits (Nos 13 and 14) were deeper than the others and contained post-pipes 70cm in diameter. These posts were presumably marking an entrance or focal point.

The inner ring was composed of six posts slightly larger in diameter than those of the outer ring. The post-pits had been excavated so close together to the extent that they were intersecting and the overall shape of the pit was lobate. No traces of soil change could be detected to indicate whether these pits had been dug in sequence. The pits had been back-filled after the posts had been set and a central pit was dug through the fills of the post-pits. This pit had been wood-lined and narrowed towards the base where it measured c.75cm square. A cremation deposit had been placed in a rounded heap, perhaps suggesting that it had originally been bagged, on the floor of this central pit. Four burnt, high quality barbed and tanged arrowheads were recovered from among the cremated bone one with its tip missing as a result of use. All four arrowheads have suffered from fire-spalling but not greatly suggesting that they might have been protected from the fire to some extent. This in turn might suggest that they had been in the body when cremated and were presumably the cause of death. It is as yet unknown whether the four arrowheads were in one body or whether more than one individual is represented by the cremated remains.



Fig 2: The Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled timber circle during excavation

About 20cm above this primary cremation was a second cremation deposit, similarly placed in a tight rounded pile associated with a simple undecorated bipartite vase Food Vessel (fig 3). Fragments of bronze/copper were recovered from higher in the central pit -fill but they are badly corroded and the type of artefact represented cannot yet be determined. This presumably represents a disturbed tertiary burial.

Traces of burning in four out of six of the post pits of the inner post ring together with a spread of charcoal in the top of the central pit suggest that this inner circle had been burned down. Presumably, being of larger diameter than the outer posts, the inner post circle would have lasted longer and so it may have been burned at a time when the outer circle was starting to collapse.



Fig 3: The secondary Food Vessel cremation in situ

To the East of the inner ring was a two post structure. It measured 2.4m long by 1m. wide and had a 'D'-shaped post at either end. These posts measured c. 80cm in diameter and were presumably split from the same tree. Traces of charcoal and burning were noted in the area between the posts. The post pits in which the posts had stood were not deep, a mere 60cm below the gravel surface, and the posts could not have stood very high. It is tempting to see these as representing the ends of some kind of altar structure but there is obviously no evidence for the above-ground nature of the feature. It is, however, otherwise difficult to explain the function and nature of this low but massively proportioned structure.

The post-pipes were, in all cases sufficiently well-preserved to allow us to identify the diameter of the posts and the surviving charcoal will eventually allow us to identify the tree species used. Already oak has been identified from some, though not all of the pits. Assuming that about a quarter to a third of a post's length is underground to ensure its stability, and allowing for the agricultural truncation of the gravel, we can assume that the posts were c.3.5 - 4m high and stood c. 2.5-3m above the gravel. The inner circle would have been taller and would have been built of larger diameter timbers as would the two posts in the SW arc of the circle marking the entrance or focal point. With the exception of these last two posts, the bases of the post pits of the outer circle were all at the same absolute level above OD irrespective of the natural rise and fall of the gravel ridge. This suggests that they were designed to ensure that the tops of uniformly pre-cut timbers were also at the same absolute height. This might in turn lead us to suspect that the posts were designed to carry some level ring beam or architrave.

It is unlikely that the site was roofed. The distance from the inner to the outer ring being too wide to be safely spanned by the necessarily substantial weight-bearing timbers. It is perhaps better to look towards the only site of this type and period which does survive above ground level, Stonehenge itself. Here the lintels are fixed to the uprights using mortice and tenon joints - a technique more usual in joinery than in masonry. Furthermore the use of such a device is unnecessary since the sheer weight of the lintels would have kept them in place. It is more likely that Stonehenge is merely a lithicisation of a common timber monument type and the similarity in ground plan of Woodhenge to Stonehenge has long been recognised (Cunnington, 1929). It is possible that we should therefore envisage these post structures as linteled rings rather than roofed buildings (fig 4) their lithic version at Stonehenge being a geographically and temporally closer parallel than the sun lodges of the North American plains Indians. Furthermore, it might be added that during the reconstruction of Sarny-Bryn-Caled, while the posts were just free-standing, the site appeared as an unintelligible forest of trees. It was only when the lintels were placed on the uprights that the circularity of the monument became better defined.

The finely worked high quality arrowheads from the primary cremation also beg parallel with Stonehenge where the skeleton of a man was found in the henge ditch associated with three high-quality arrowheads and a wristguard (Evans, 1984). In this case, the arrows had certainly been the cause of death since the tips were found embedded in the ribs of the skeleton. The fineness of the arrowheads used makes it unlikely that they be used in war or hunting and the possibility that the corpses at both Stonehenge and Sarn-y-Bryn-Caled represent sacrifices must be seriously considered. Sacrifice is such an emotive and sensational phenomenon that its interpretation will always be difficult and subjective. However there is a growing amount of data which may be suggestive of this practice in later Prehistory such as the unequivocal evidence of Lindow Man (Stead *et al.* 1986) and of course, the central burial of the axed girl at Woodhenge is perhaps as clear an indication of ritual killing as is likely to survive in normal soil conditions from this period of Prehistory.



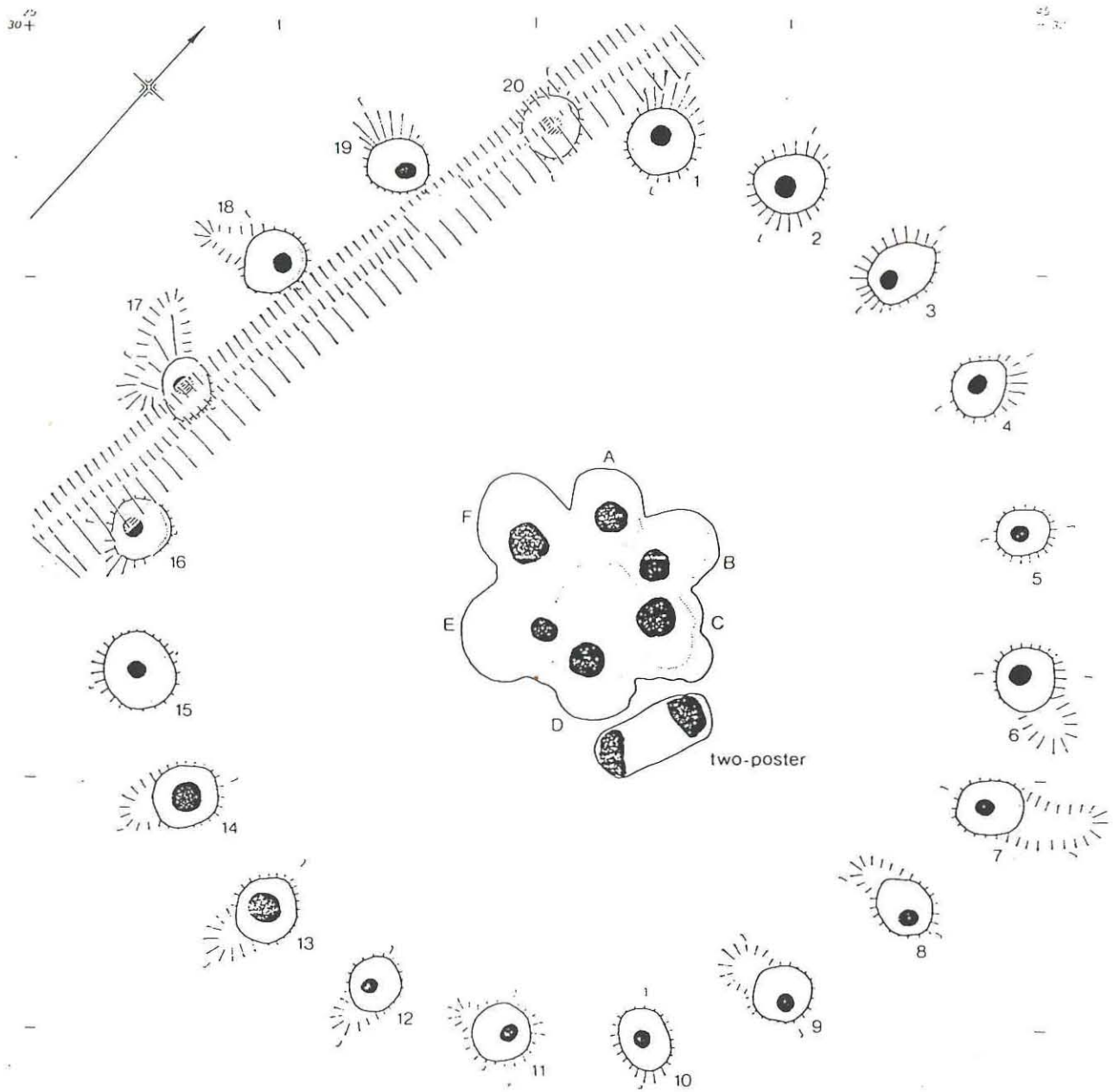
Fig 4: Reconstruction of the timber circle. The original timbers were thicker than those used in the reconstruction.

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Sarn-y-bryn-caled pit circle

POWYS

5+
25

bvw +5
45

0 1 2 3 4 5 10 15 20 m