

Henges and ceremonialism in late third millennium Wessex

Dr. Jan Harding (University of Newcastle)

The role of henges and other related enclosures in the creation of the early Bronze Age, and more specifically the 'Wessex Culture', have been under-studied. Whilst they have been seen by some as actively contributing to the development of social elites — and hence, the new forms of power and inequality with which early Bronze Age burials and barrows are traditionally associated — these interpretations envisage a single generalised narrative of change and a distinct phase during which these earlier monuments were abandoned. Yet this overlooks the very different biographies of these sites in the latter half of the third millennium, their contrasting relations with single grave burials, and the different speeds at which later Neolithic traditions of ceremonialism 'ended'. It is argued that by accommodating such detail within landscape-based genealogies it is possible to grasp the contrasting ebb and flow of religious trends and local fortunes as the later Neolithic world view was renegotiated and marginalised by family-based beliefs. This patchwork of social process shows signs of both 'revolution' and late Beaker 'evolution', and as such, highlights the need for more sophisticated bottom-up models of change for late third and early second millennia Wessex.