Barrow aesthetics and fenland monuments

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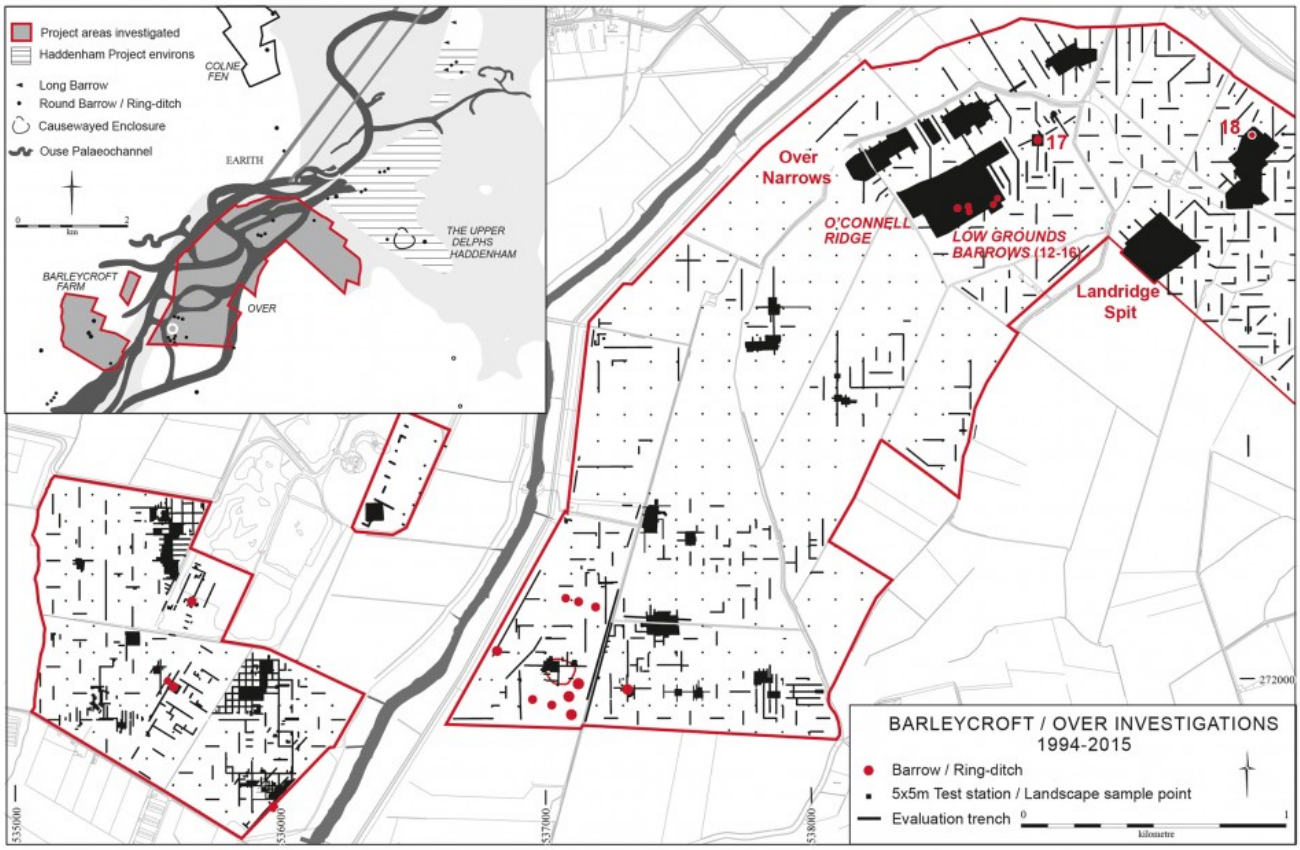


Figure 1. Project location map, with Landridge Spit site-area and barrow 18 indicated in the upper right.

Recent excavations of upstanding barrows within East Anglia's former marsh fenlands have provided groundbreaking insights into these monumental structures and the groups who created them. These insights arise not only from the environmental preservation of these barrows, but also from their stratigraphic survival. Compared to plough-denuded monuments found elsewhere, the survival of barrow mounds in the fenlands allows construction sequences and secondary interments to be identified. As well as providing a sound basis for radiocarbon dating (Garrow *et al.* 2014), this level of detail has implications for interpretations of the social organisation of the groups who constructed these barrows.

The Barleycroft Farm/Over Project aims to investigate the changing landscapes during prehistory either side of the River Great Ouse. The project's earlier work focused primarily on the former mid-stream islands; the current phase of work marks the first exposure on the river's east bankside (Figure 1).

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Figure 2. Barleycroft Farm/Over barrow 18 excavations: top, mound-excavation stages (photographs, D. Webb) and, below, Ben Robinson's aerial photograph in which the excavation segments dug initially around the monument's circuits are visible.

Between May and July 2015, the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) undertook a staged excavation of a complex barrow monument on the Landridge Spit along the fen-edge north of Willingham, Cambridgeshire (Figure 1: 18). The progress of this work is illustrated by Dave Webb's paired photographs (Figure 2: top).

As with the other barrows investigated by the project, the techniques employed on the Landridge Spit monument represent an expedient adaption of the classic barrow-digging model, with the aim of dissecting the monument's main construction stages. After stripping away the topsoil, the mound was subjected to geophysical survey. The lines of the staggered cross-baulks were then laid out and 1m-wide transects were dug by hand through the mound. Thereafter, following close scrutiny of the exposed sections, the mound was reduced by a combination of small tracked-machine excavation and hand-digging, with intensive geoarchaeological sampling of soils and 'interfaces'. The surrounding ditches were dug by hand, with at least two segments per quadrant and closer sampling as required.

Barrow digging entails a certain aesthetic and there is a greater onus on their 'visualisation' than for most other site types. Based on their circular forms, barrows have an inherent 'geometry' and can have sculptural qualities that are not unlike the 'land art' of Richard Long and others. They can generate striking imagery,

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and it is essential that their excavation 'looks right'.

Our first foray into this aesthetic practice arose from the 1996 excavation of a Bronze Age ring-ditch at Barleycroft Farm. As a ring-ditch (rather than a barrow), no mound as such survived, but the buried soil that sealed it was known to have a high density of worked flint (Evans & Knight 2000). Accordingly, across two of its quadrants, this horizon was dug chequerboard-style to facilitate artefact retrieval. This amounted to a perfectly reasonable sampling strategy, but we were also aware of the image this grid pattern would produce in contrast to the monument's underlying double-circuit (Figure 3: left).

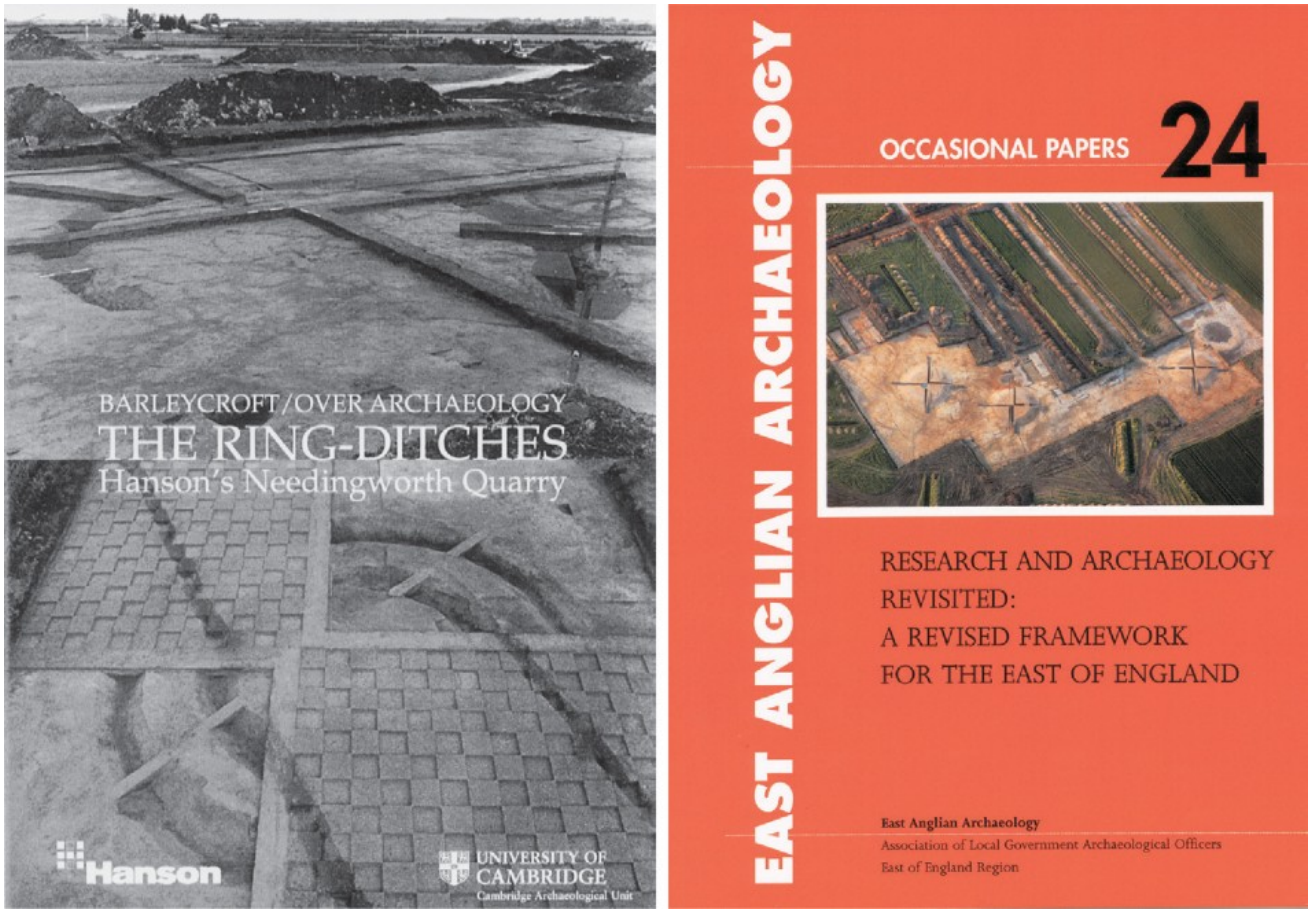


Figure 3. Monument imagery: left, project poster showing chequerboard-esque excavation of Butcher's Rise ring-ditch (bottom; photographs, M. Knight & C. Evans); right, cover of the 2011 Research and archaeology revisited: a revised framework for the east of England, featuring an aerial shot of the Low Ground barrows under excavation (with hand-dug transects through their mounds visible; and, far-right side, the main pond barrow's hollow; photograph, B. Robinson).

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Figure 4. Monument poses: top, Barleycroft Farm/Over barrow 15 (photograph, D. Webb); below, Pitt Rivers's Wor Barrow excavations.

Upstanding monuments can have theatrical qualities. For the photograph of the Barleycroft Farm/Over barrow 15, published in Evans *et al.* (2014: fig. 5; see Figure 4: top), Webb arranged the site personnel and framed the image so that the transect across the barrow's ring-bank and small central mound aligned. Representations such as this have a pedigree. Amongst the most striking images in British archaeology are those of Pitt Rivers's 1893–1894 Wor Barrow excavations (e.g. Bowden 1991). Similar to the great railway cuttings of the nineteenth century, there is something inherently dramatic in the way his excavations progressed along the Neolithic long barrow's mound, leaving its monolithic baulks upstanding. In the manner of all long-exposure Victorian photographs, the Wor Barrow workmen were surely staged and this is also true of the manner in which the site's contour model is so prominently propped up in the foreground (Figure 4: bottom).

Recently in the Barleycroft Farm/Over landscape, the CAU excavated the Low Grounds Barrow Cemetery on the O'Connell Ridge, one of the river's former islands (Figure 1). This consisted of three unditched, turf-built round barrows and two pond barrows (barrows 12–16; see Evans *et al.* 2014; 2015; Garrow *et al.* 2014). Lying at only *c.* 0.8–1.2m OD, it was thought that the absence of ditches might be explained by the need to

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avoid striking groundwater (Figure 3). This interpretation received further support when excavation of the neighbouring barrow, located on the 'top' of the ridge at 1.35m OD (Figure 1: 17), demonstrated that it was ditched. Yet the Landridge Spit barrow at just 0.5m OD—the lowest of all of these monuments—was found to be surrounded by a sequence of ditches. Hence, regardless of whether or not there was a need to avoid groundwater, the site's extended sequence indicates long-term place-marking.

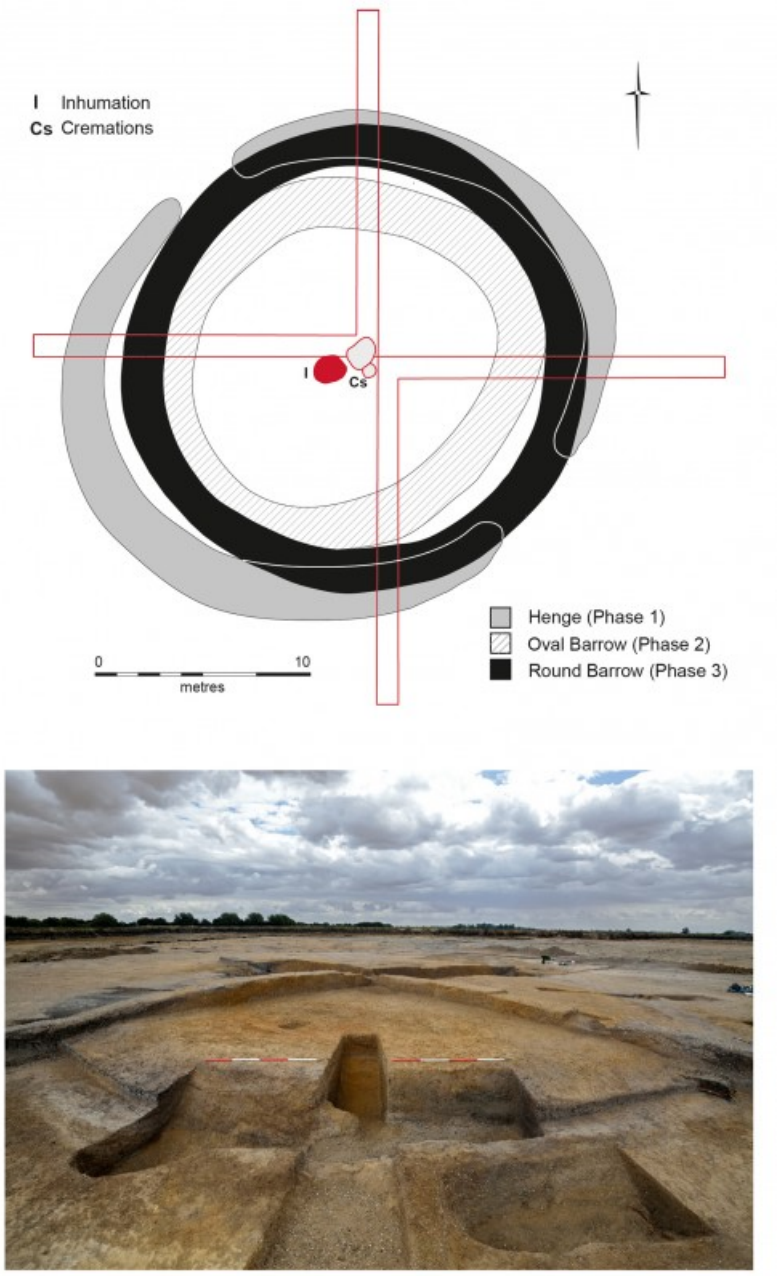


Figure 5. Barleycroft Farm/Over barrow 18, phased site plan (above); below, looking south-east through the henge's entranceway (photograph, D. Webb).

Surprisingly, the Landridge Spit monument's sequence was initiated by a henge (class II; 22 × 24m), with entrances to the north-west and south-east (Figure 5), the first such monument to be excavated along the river's lower reaches. Despite the lack of finds, the henge must be of Neolithic date as pits of Beaker date cut its circuit. During the Early Bronze Age, the barrow itself—offset within the interior of the henge—was initiated by a crouched adult inhumation located within a shallow pit, covered by a mound (*c.* 0.5–0.6m+ high) and enclosed by a ditch (15 × 16.5m).

The monument's final reworking involved a circular ditch (*c.* 20m diameter); unlike the preceding two ditches that were variously filled with clay and gravel, this final ditch had largely peat fills. Given this—and that its instigation clearly related to the insertion of two cremation pits—precedent suggests a later Early Bronze Age

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date (*c.* 1800–1600 cal. BC). At that time, marine inundation and the resultant backing up of rivers meant that the region was becoming significantly 'wet'. The barrow lay on the floodplain of the river, and water-washed deposits carried off the mound and down onto its flanks evince the effects of flooding. In other words, this was not a logical place to build a barrow; the monument's protracted redefinition must have been determined by its 'place ancestry'.

Further unditched upstanding turf barrows akin to those in the Low Grounds Cemetery have been excavated in the Fens (e.g. Pickstone & Mortimer 2011). At King's Dyke West, Whittlesey (Figure 6: top; Knight & Brudenell 2016), excavation has revealed a similar sequence to that at the Landridge monument—although here the different components were distributed across *c.* 100m rather than 'stacked' at the same location. This group of monuments was positioned on the fen island's highest point at *c.* 4m OD and is, therefore, ploughed out, with no upstanding elements surviving. It too was initiated by a henge with entrances to the north-west and south-east (although unlike that at Landridge, it had a pit circle within its interior). In front of the henge were two round barrows: 25.65m and 15.4m in diameter (the larger having a primary, small barrow form, 8.25m across). These barrows had deep-cut, central inhumation graves of probable Beaker date, although the absence of grave goods and unsuccessful attempts at radiocarbon dating the bone preclude certainty. Finally, set next to—and partially cutting into—the larger barrow, there was a small, Collared Urn cremation cemetery.

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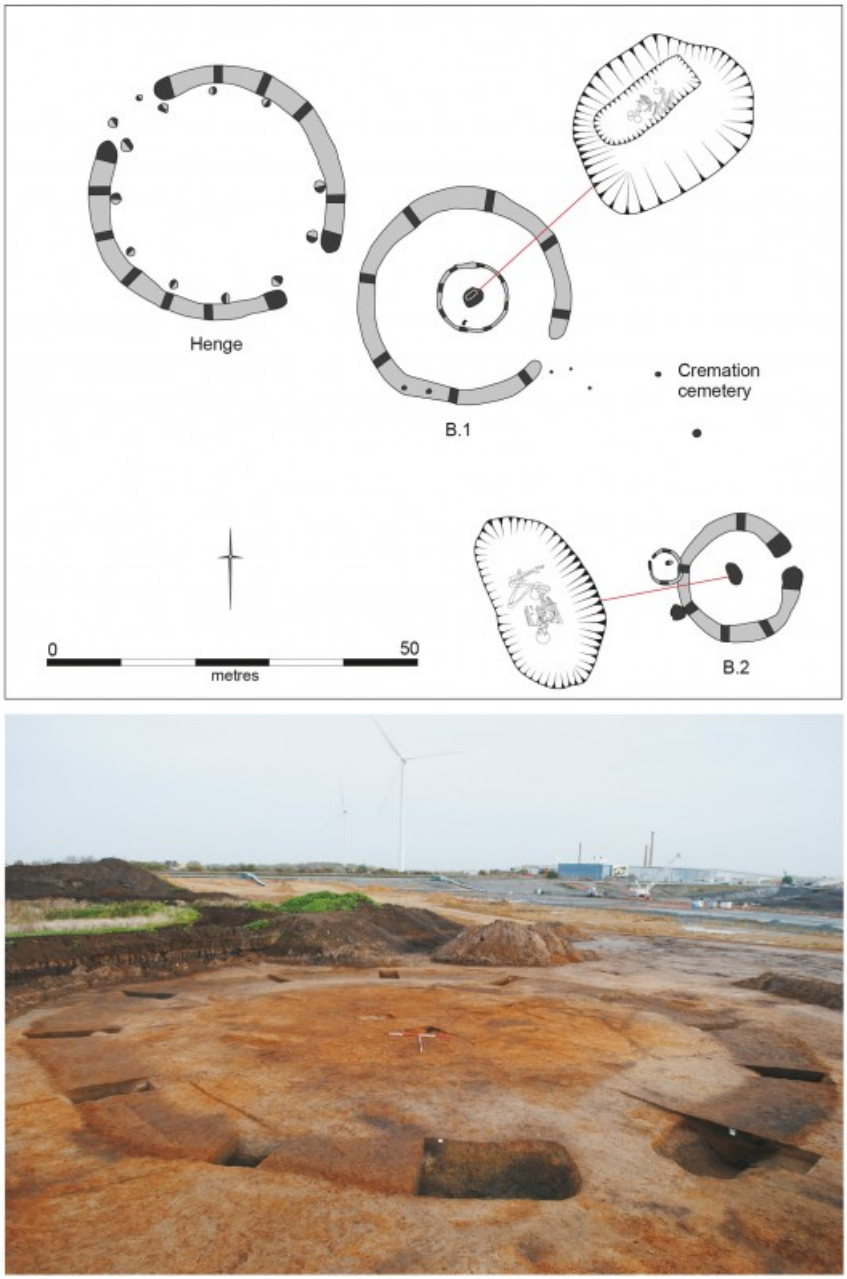


Figure 6. King's Dyke West, Whittlesey monument complex (top; after Knight & Brudenell 2016); below, Must Farm Terrace, Neolithic oval barrow (photograph, D. Webb).

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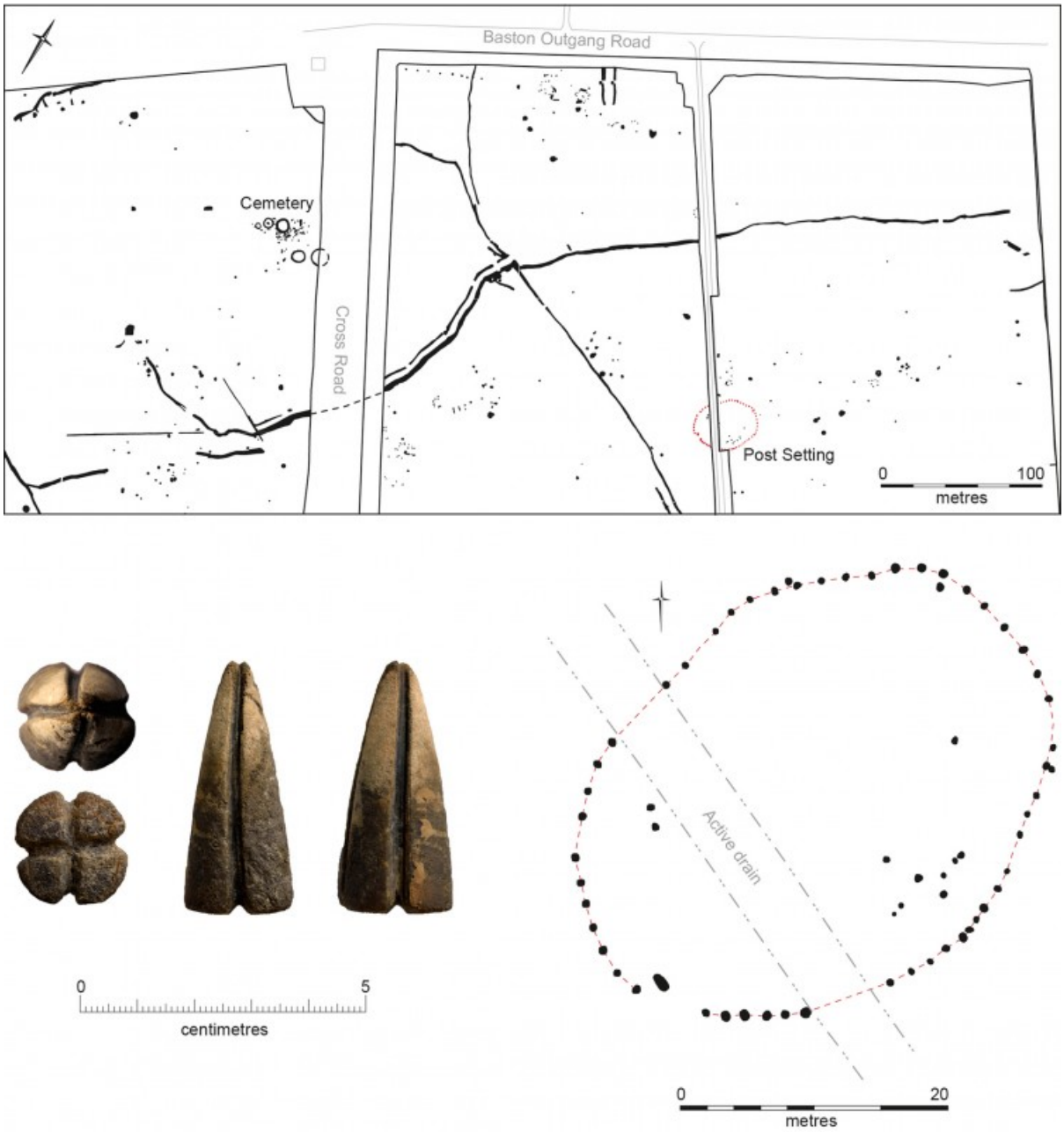


Figure 7. Langtoft, south Lincolnshire investigations showing post-setting (above and bottom right); lower left, the modified fossil belemnite.

The ditches of both the King's Dyke West barrows were interrupted by entrances. This would seem to be something of a local tradition as, nearby on the Must Farm Terrace, an earlier Neolithic oval barrow, excavated in 2010, was also found to have an entranceway in its surrounding ditch (Figure 6: bottom; Knight & Murrell 2011).

Finally, during the winter of 2014–2015, an intriguing post-setting was excavated at Langtoft's fen-edge in south Lincolnshire: a large oval (28.6 × 38.2m) with an entranceway oriented to the south-west (Figure 7). Thus far, only a single date has been successfully returned (1630–1500 cal BC; Beta-415580) and, without any accompanying burial, there is ambiguity about whether the post-setting should be classed as a corral or a monument. Few finds were recovered from its substantial postholes; the only significant object is a modified fossil belemnite with naturally occurring seams that have been deeply channelled, perhaps to facilitate its suspension as a personal ornament. Despite uncertainty as to the site's precise function, and further to the Fens marine themes discussed in Evans (2015), it may be telling that the form of this post-setting is reminiscent of the timber circle II recently excavated at Holme-next-to-Sea (Seahenge II; Tyers 2014).

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As a result of the pace of development-funded fieldwork, the corpus of excavated monuments from the Fens is increasing rapidly. The wide variability of rites and practices now documented challenges long-established, straightforward narratives about their form and significance. While we seem to be glimpsing real sub-regional traditions—especially along the river valleys that debouch into the marshlands—it will be some years before any 'new narratives' are possible as it takes time to enable convincing pattern resolution.

Acknowledgements

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