



Circles of posts were important ritual monuments of the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age appearing around 3000 BC and continuing to be built until about 1000 BC. Some 50 sites have been excavated but other potential monuments are known from aerial photography. They may also be found inside henge monuments and can be replaced by stone circles. Timber circles, however, present many challenges to the archaeologist.

Firstly, timber circles can only be identified by excavation. Remote sensing techniques may identify circles of pits but only excavation can prove whether they held posts. Secondly, the postholes survive only to ground level and so, unlike stone circles and henges, we do not know what they originally looked like. Thirdly, many are found in ploughed environments and there is often no physical relationship between the circle and whatever features may be found inside.

Timber circles are found in a variety of forms and sizes from a few metres across to almost 40m at Durrington Walls. They can be circles or ovals of single, double and multiple circuits. There appears to be no difference in date between oval and circular forms, but the larger multiple circles do tend to cluster around the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age transition between about 2500 and 2000 BC. The smaller, simple circles were built throughout the period. Reconstruction of these circles is very subjective and uncertain and is usually based on the width of the post and the depth of the posthole. The size of the post can be gleaned from traces (post pipes) seen in the fill of the postholes, and the height can be estimated by using the 1:3 ratio. This means that for every 1m below ground, some 3m probably stood above ground. This ratio has been calculated by a number of researchers using different data but the result seems to be consistent.

The simplest reconstruction is as a circle of free-standing posts but traces of planking at sites such as North Mains, Perth and Kinross, and the clay-fill of the posthole upper levels at Sarn-y-

bryn-caled, Powys, suggest that these posts may have supported planking or wattle and daub panelling to create closed spaces. Certainly, the multiple circles, assuming that at least some of the post rings were contemporary, would have seriously restricted views into the central area. Entrances can be detected at some timber circles by a pair of larger posts such as at Sarn-y-bryn-caled, by wider gaps such as at Ballynahatty, Co. Antrim, or even by avenues such as at Durrington Walls, Wiltshire and this further suggests that people were intended to enter the circle by a specific route.

Timber circles have, in the past, been reconstructed as large roofed buildings but often, in the case of multiple circles, not all the rings can be included in the reconstructions and from an architect's point of view there are usually far more posts than are structurally necessary. Stonehenge may provide a clue as to the appearance of at least some timber circles because, unlike other stone circles, the uprights at Stonehenge are dressed and the lintels are fixed to the uprights using mortice and tenon and tongue and groove jointing. These are woodworking rather than masonry techniques. This suggests that the builders of Stonehenge were more used to creating such monuments in wood. At least some timber circles may therefore have been lintelled structures.

Burials sometimes occur within timber circles and may often appear macabre. The central burial at Woodhenge, Wiltshire, was of an infant whose head had been split open and laid out as two halves in the grave. At Sarn-y-bryn-caled the central burial had probably been shot with arrows tipped with high quality arrowheads drawing parallel with the Stonehenge archer. These burials were secondary additions, as is also the case at the multiple circle at Balfarg in Fife and at North Mains. That the users of timber circles observed the sun can also be inferred at some sites where orientation on the cardinal points can be detected by the position of deposits in the postholes, the direction of entrances or even by larger posts.

As with henges, some timber circles can be seen as part of a development. The outward facing ramps attached to the postholes at North Mains demonstrate that the henge must be later than the circle as the posts would have had to have been brought across the ditch. The post ramps in the fourth ring at Woodhenge, show that the posts were brought from the south which would also have involved crossing the ditch. These ramps also indicate that the inner three post rings could not have been standing when the fourth was constructed. Furthermore, the circles seem to have been replaced by a stone setting and probably finally covered by a burial mound covering the child burial mentioned above.

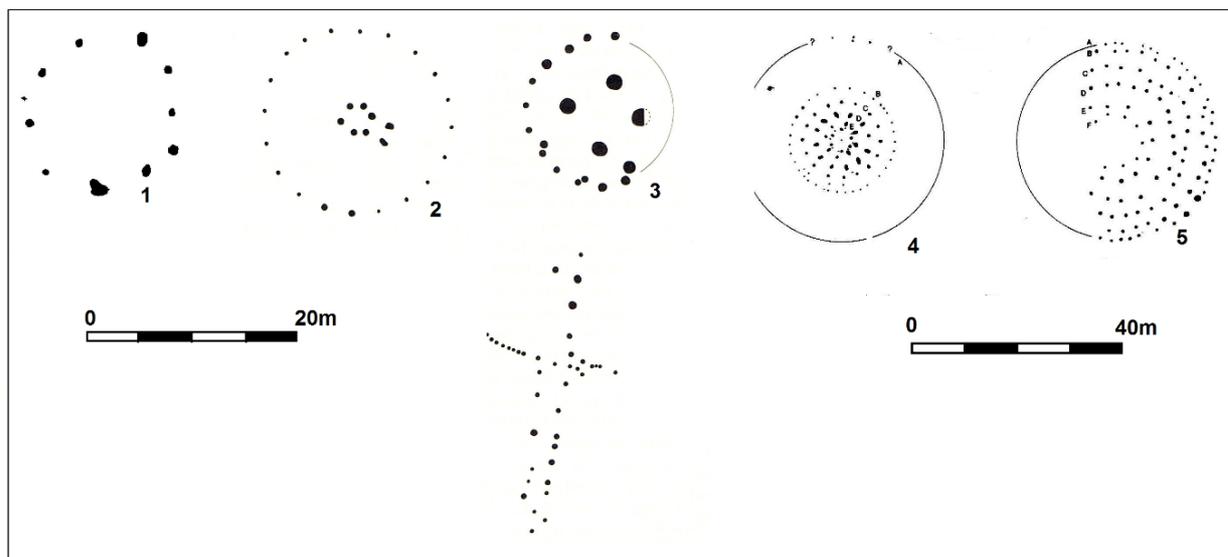
Further Reading

Barclay, G. 1983. Sites of the third millennium BC to the first millennium AD at North Mains, Strathallan, Perthshire. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 113, 122–281

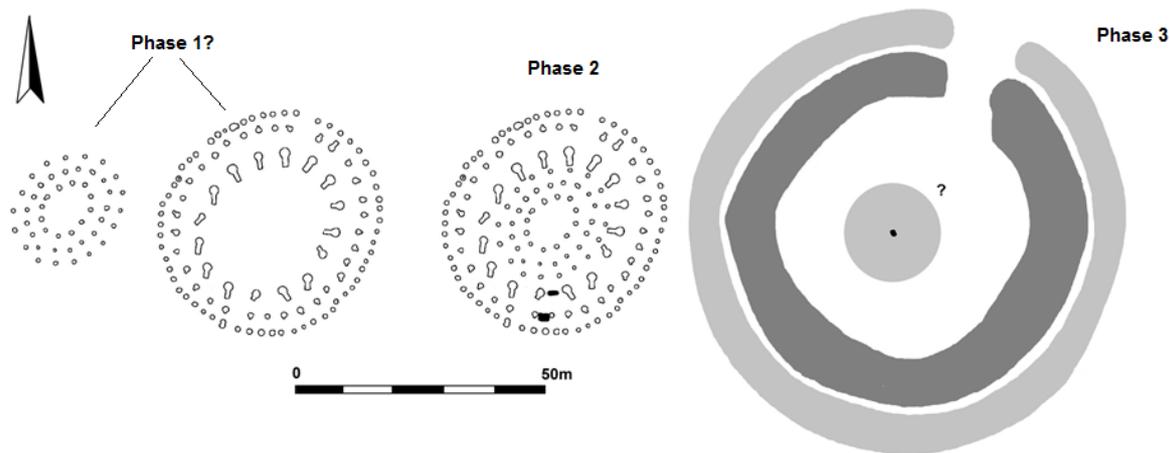
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Single, double and multiple timber circles. 1 Machrie Moor, Arran; 2 Sarn-y-bryn-caled, Powys; 3 Durrington Walls N, Wiltshire; 4 The Sanctuary, Wiltshire; 5 Durrington Walls S, Wiltshire



Possible phasing at Woodhenge, Wiltshire. Note the position of the post ramps



Sarn-y-bryn-caled, Powys, as reconstructed at the end of the excavations

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Alex Gibson.

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