A DECORATED MEGALITH FROM KNOWLTON HENGES, DORSET, ENGLAND

During the Spring 2000 season of the Wyke Down project (see French et al. forthcoming) an exciting archaeological discovery was made. We were informed by Mr. Robert Antell that two large stones ploughed out of the southern henge at Knowlton, Dorset c. 30 years ago were located on his farm (Knowle Hill Farm, part of the Shaftesbury Estate). Mr. Antell suggested that the stones came from the bank of the south-eastern section of the henge (Fig. 1), and that one stone had artwork on it.

The two stones were found and examined. They appear to be heathstone, an iron-rich sarsen stone, which is found locally at the edge of tertiary deposits, but this is yet to be confirmed. An outcrop is known to exist near Cranborne just to the northeast, and field walking adjacent to Knowle Hill has shown that fragments of heathstone (up to c. 30 cm in size) are located nearby.

The first stone found is rectangular, roughly 60 cm wide, 105 cm long and 18 cm thick, and has a design of four concentric rings pecked into its centre on one side (Fig. 2). The design is reminiscent of patterns of concentric circles found on Grooved Ware pottery from Down Farm, c. 4 km upstream. This appears to be a fairly rare motif for Grooved Ware, but has been found on at least 4 vessels, one from Henge I at Wyke Down I, and three from two postholes and a pit outside of the henge at the Wyke Down II site at Down Farm (Green 1987; Cleal 1991, 1999). The design would fit with Shee-Twohig’s (1981, 107) passage grave motif lb or 2b (concentric circles). The second stone is rectangular and roughly 60 cm wide, 80 cm long and 15 cm thick. No art was found on this stone. Both stones have calcium carbonate concretions on one of their flat sides, suggesting that they were buried or lying with those faces downwards for some time. Some of this covers the concentric rings on the first stone, suggesting that this side was facing downwards, perhaps as a coverslab on a cist, and that the art is of some antiquity.

The discovery of megalithic artwork in this area, and especially of this type, is almost unprecedented. In the nearby area, examples of megalithic carved stones are limited to the Bronze Age daggers and spearheads (thought to be moulds) on a stone from Badbury barrow (Warne 1866, 57; Grinsell 1958, 107). The exact position of this barrow, excavated in the 19th century, is unknown, but it was located somewhere near Badbury Rings, c. 6 km to the south of Knowlton. The design found on the stone from Knowlton is, however, reminiscent of Neolithic megalithic art found in the classic areas of Ireland, Anglesey, the Mersey valley, Orkney Islands, Brittany and Iberia (see Shee-Twohig 1981), which might suggest that the stones are Neolithic and relate directly to the southern henge. This henge was classified by Atkinson (1951) as being one of his Type II henges, which are often associated with the
presence of internal stone circles, and there is the possibility that engraved stones might occur in these. A piece of worked chalk was found during excavation of a trench through the henge ditch at Knowlton (Burrow and Gale 1995) and a Neolithic decorated chalk lump was found in the Monkton Up Wimborne shaft to the north (Green 2000). Besides this, in this region Neolithic stone carving appears to have been seen only in the engraved circular and linear motifs found on the chalk walls of ditch segments making up the Flagstones enclosure (near Dorchester) (Woodward 1988; Healy 1997), and on smaller stones and chalk lumps from sites further afield, such as Windmill Hill, Wiltshire (Smith 1965, 134), Stonehenge Bottom, Wiltshire (Vatcher 1969) and North Marden, West Sussex (Drewett 1986).

Megaliths with the type of carvings seen on the stone from Knowlton are usually associated with tombs of various types, suggesting perhaps that the stones might originate from some type of Neolithic grave within the henge or in the immediate vicinity. But a Neolithic date cannot be definitely ascribed to these stones from Knowlton. The closest parallel in the region comes from Winterborne Came barrow 18b (Came Down, near Dorchester), in which two possible Early/Middle Bronze Age cairns were covered with stones decorated with three concentric circles (Fig. 3) (after Warne 1866, 37; Grinsell 1958, 107). Also, several round barrows in the region are reported to have had large stones covering cists, or even used in stone circles at the bases of barrows (e.g. Osmington Down barrows, Woodyates barrow C and Badbury barrow) (Wame 1866). Given this, it may be that some later monument or burial located in or near this part of the Knowlton southern henge is represented.

Whether these stones are truly associated with the southern henge itself, with some other adjacent site, or were introduced here from a more distant site is unknown. No stones were located in the area covered by the Bournemouth University geophysical survey, although the henge bank was said to have not responded well to the techniques used (Burrow and Gale 1995). No other decorated stones of the type from Knowle Hill Farm are known to have been found from Knowlton, but heathstone slabs were used in Knowlton Church in the central henge, including one very large block. Possibly some of these are re-used from earlier monuments.

The stones are now located at the museum at Down Farm (address in footnotes), where they await further examination.

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2000. A Landscape Revealed. 10,000 Years on a Chalkland Farm. Brimscombe Port: Tempus.