



Henges are Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ritual enclosures that broadly date to between 3000 and 1500 BC though there are a few outliers in the later Bronze and Iron Ages. The name derives from Stonehenge (Hanging Stones) and was used to describe earthen enclosures originally with internal features such as standing stones or posts. Now, the name has been given to a class of circular or oval enclosures largely defined by an internal ditch and external bank. This peculiar ditch/bank arrangement suggests that these enclosures were not defensive but rather that they defined an area used for ritual or ceremonial purposes. Stonehenge is unusual in having an external ditch and internal bank. There are some sites with double ditches, such as those of the Thornborough complex in Yorkshire or Arminghall in Norfolk.

Henges vary in size from the large enclosure at Durrington Walls, Wiltshire, at some 400 m in diameter, to much smaller sites that measure only a few metres across but share the ditch/bank arrangement such as at Fargo Plantation near Stonehenge or Llandegai Site E in Gwynedd. The smaller sites have sometimes been called 'hengiforms' to acknowledge their similarity of layout with the larger enclosures. They normally have one or two entrances that formed the basis of their classification. Class 1 henges have single entrances and are usually circular whilst Class 2 henges have two, usually opposed, entrances and tend to be more oval in outline often with one arc of ditch being slightly longer than the other. On current absolute dating evidence (which is admittedly quite sparse) it would appear that the Class 1 henges span their whole period of currency (Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age) whilst the Class 2 monuments, and some of the larger Class 1 sites, date more to the second half of the third millennium between around 2500–2000 BC.

The nature of the rituals and ceremonies that took place at these sites is difficult to determine but avenues at some sites such as Avebury in Wiltshire, suggest that they may have involved public gatherings and processions though this is unlikely at some of the smaller hengiform

monuments. Some internal arrangements may suggest solar and lunar observations and internal pits containing special deposits may hint at episodes of ritual deposition. The sites do not appear to have a major burial focus although deposits of human bone – both inhumations and cremations – are often found within the enclosures or their ditches.

Henges are clearly related to other circular monuments such as Timber Circles and Stone Circles with which they often coincide. Woodhenge, Wiltshire, contains six concentric ovals of posts, whilst Avebury, Wiltshire, Cairnpapple Hill in West Lothian or Arbor Low, Derbyshire, contain stone circles. These stone circle/henge combinations have been termed Circle-henges and appear to run down the centre of Britain where the highland and lowland zones meet. No such hybrid name has been given to those containing timber arrangements.

Recent excavations have suggested that, on sites that coincide with timber or stone settings, the bank and ditch may have been the latest element to have been built. This is particularly true at Woodhenge where the posthole ramps (used to facilitate the raising of the posts) face out towards the ditch which would have seriously hampered the setting of the ovals. Dating at North Mains, Perth and Kinross, suggest that the bank and ditch were raised several centuries after the timber circles whilst dating at Dyffryn Lane, Powys, shows that the henge was constructed after the stone circle had become ruined. Circumstantial evidence at Avebury and Arbor Low also suggests that the bank and ditch are later as the closeness of the inner edge of the ditch to the stoneholes would have made the construction of the stone circles difficult.

Henges often remained visible in the landscape for a considerable time. Some are reused in the Iron Age whilst others can attract burials of the early historic period.

Further Reading

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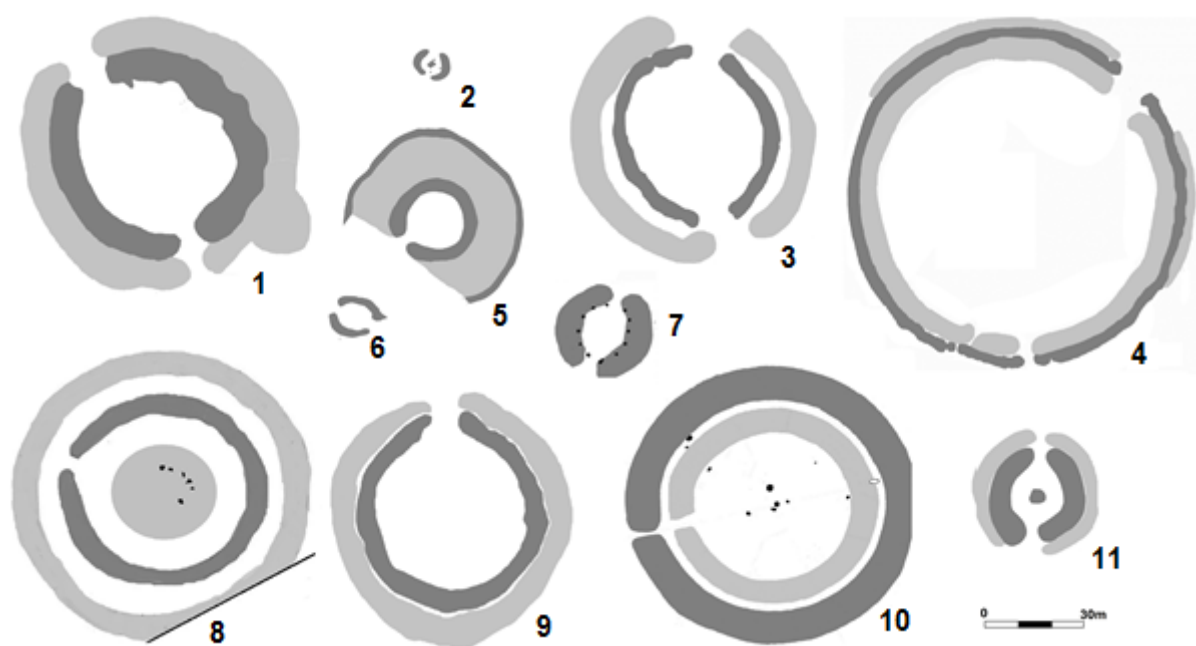
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Henge plans to a common scale: dark colour represents the ditch; lighter the bank. 1. Arbor Low, Derbys; 2. Fargo Plantation, Wilts; 3. Cairnpapple, Lothian; 4. Stonehenge, Wilts; 5. Arminghall, Norfolk; 6. Llandegai E, Gwynedd; 7. Vaynor, Dyfed; 8. Dyffryn Lane, Powys; 9. Stones of Stenness, Orkney; 10. Llandegai A, Gwynedd; 11. Broomend of Crichtie, Grampian.

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Alex Gibson (University of Bradford)

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