

# The origins of Avebury

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*The Avebury henge is one of the famous megalithic monuments of the European Neolithic, yet much remains unknown about the detail and chronology of its construction. Here, the results of a new geophysical survey and re-examination of earlier excavation records illuminate the earliest beginnings of the monument. The authors suggest that Avebury's Southern Inner Circle was constructed to memorialise and monumentalise the site of a much earlier 'foundational' house. The significance here resides in the way that traces of dwelling may take on special social and historical value, leading to their marking and commemoration through major acts of monument building.*

*Keywords:* Britain, Avebury, Neolithic, megalithic, memory

## Introduction

Alongside Stonehenge, the passage graves of the Boyne Valley and the Carnac alignments, the Avebury henge is one of the pre-eminent megalithic monuments of the European Neolithic. Its 420m-diameter earthwork encloses the world's largest stone circle. This in turn encloses two smaller yet still vast megalithic circles—each approximately 100m in diameter—and complex internal stone settings (Figure 1). Avenues of paired standing stones lead from two of its four entrances, together extending for approximately 3.5km and linking with other monumental constructions. Avebury sits within the centre of a landscape rich in later Neolithic monuments, including Silbury Hill and the West Kennet palisade enclosures (Smith 1965; Pollard & Reynolds 2002; Gillings & Pollard 2004).

Avebury and Stonehenge are inscribed within the same World Heritage Site. While recent programmes of research have contributed much to enhance our understanding of the prehistory of Stonehenge (Parker Pearson 2012), the same cannot be said for Avebury. The last

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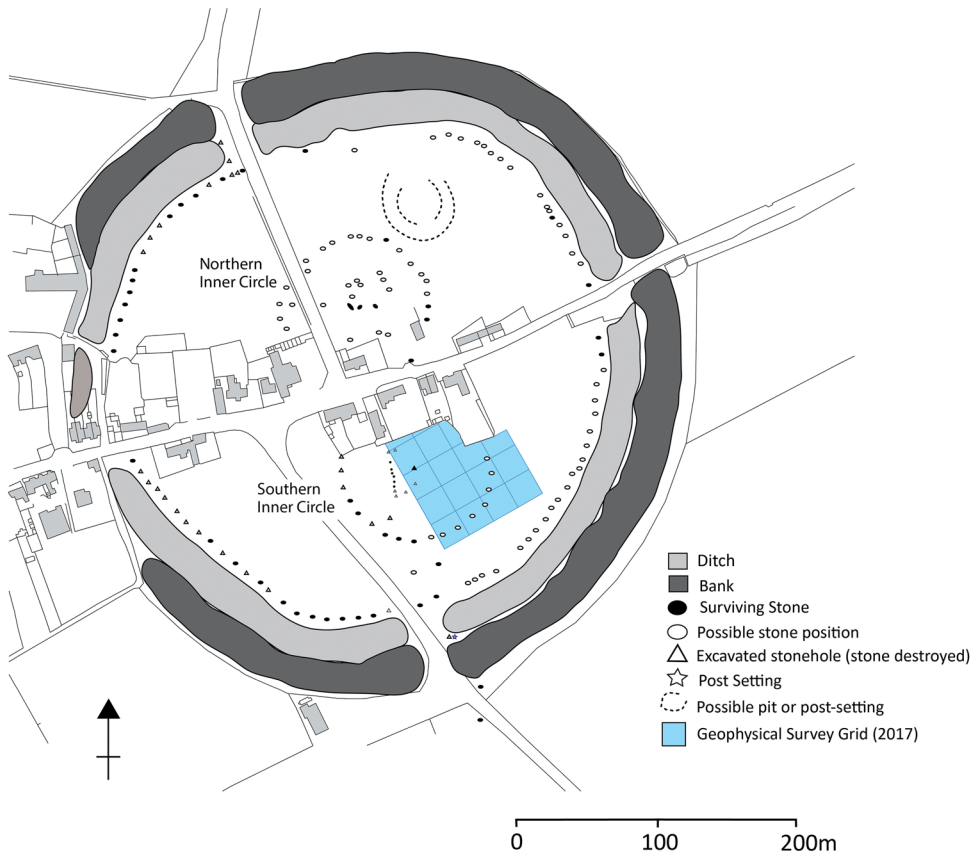
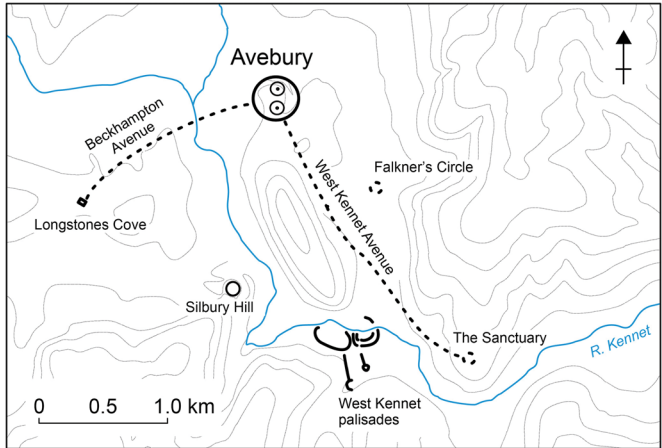


Fig. 1 - Colour online, Colour in print

Figure 1. The Avebury monument (incorporates data (c) Crown Copyright/database right 2007; an Ordnance Survey/ (EDINA) supplied service) (figure by the authors).

89 major programme of excavation within the henge was undertaken by Alexander Keiller in the  
90 1930s (Smith 1965). Furthermore, reliable dates for the hypothesised construction phases at  
91 Avebury and other monuments in its environs remain scarce (Pollard & Cleal 2004). We can  
92 be confident that the main Avebury earthwork was created around 2500 cal BC, but this seals  
93 a primary earthen bank whose precise date is uncertain; there is similar ambiguity with regard  
94 to the dating of the Southern and Northern Inner Circles and the megaliths that they enclose.  
95 Secure knowledge of the monument's chronology is essential, as it frames our understanding  
96 of how the henge and its megalithic settings came into being—whether through incremental  
97 development or as a single notionally planned entity. On the basis of the current evidence, we  
98 prefer the former scenario. Here, we make the case for a long history for the monument's  
99 initial development, arguing that events pre-dating the first phases of earthwork construction  
100 and stone erection at Avebury had a direct bearing on the monument's subsequent develop-  
101 ment. This in turn forces us to consider how matters of landscape inhabitation and historical  
102 memory relate to the origins of great monuments (Barrett 1994; Pollard 2012, *in press*).  
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## 104 **Avebury before the henge**

105  
106 By the second and third quarters of the fourth millennium BC, the Upper Kennet Valley of  
107 central southern England, within which Avebury is located, had become a major focus for  
108 settlement, tomb building and periodic gatherings (Whittle *et al.* 2011). Several areas of occu-  
109 pation spanning from the fourth into the earliest third millennium BC can be identified on and  
110 around the low saddle of ground upon which the Avebury henge was constructed. During the  
111 1930s, excavations under the western circuit of the henge bank yielded sherds of earlier Neo-  
112 lithic (4000–3400 cal BC) plain bowl pottery and worked flint (Smith 1965: 224–26). These  
113 might be linked to a phase of early plough cultivation exposed in a trench dug through the bank  
114 at the Avebury School Site (Evans 1972: 273). Middle Neolithic (3400–2900 cal BC) ceramics  
115 and lithics were recovered from the pre-henge soil at two locations under the south-eastern sec-  
116 tion of bank (Gray 1935; Smith 1965: 184). Another concentration of pottery and worked flint  
117 comes from within the Southern Inner Circle and is notable as the only such scatter known  
118 within the henge interior (we return to this below).

119 In the zone immediately surrounding the earthwork are other areas of Early and Middle  
120 Neolithic activity. These are evidenced by flint scatters, a pit containing plain bowl pottery,  
121 located close to the northern end of the West Kennet Avenue, and a tree-throw with similarly  
122 early ceramics associated with an early fourth-millennium BC radiocarbon date, located  
123 within 100m of the east entrance (Pollard *et al.* 2012). Other traces of fourth-millennium  
124 BC occupation are known from low ground and mid-slope locations within 1km of the  
125 henge: to the west in the Winterbourne valley, to the east along the foot of Avebury  
126 Down, and to the south on Waden Hill and the line of the West Kennet Avenue (Thomas  
127 1955; Smith 1965; Evans *et al.* 1993: 151–53; Pollard *et al.* 2015). Regionally, evidence for  
128 settlement is strong; the archaeological record for the first quarter of the fourth millennium  
129 BC could indicate dispersed and small settlement foci, with greater aggregation following  
130 3700 cal BC—notably on Windmill Hill (Whittle *et al.* 1999).

131 A key question is the degree, or otherwise, to which these early episodes of activity influ-  
132 enced the siting of the henge and its architecture. Were former episodes of significant (i.e.

133 important historically, or by association) settlement and the people and lineages connected to  
134 them remembered by later inhabitants? Could the conscious retention of memory relating to  
135 such former activity explain the ontological shift from a place of routine practices to one that  
136 was deeply sacred, as indexed by the creation of the henge and its megalithic settings? We  
137 contend that some events and their material traces did matter in an historical sense and  
138 were referenced in the building of the megalithic settings.

## 140 **The Southern Inner Circle**

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142 The Southern Inner Circle visible today is the product of a programme of excavation and  
143 reconstruction carried out by Alexander Keiller in 1939 (Smith 1965). Utilising a 50ft  
144 (15.24m) grid of squares subdivided into 25ft (7.62m) quarters, Keiller's intention was to  
145 excavate areas not covered by village houses and gardens. The outbreak of the Second  
146 World War curtailed this operation, but not before a substantial area had been excavated,  
147 including the western arc and interior (Figure 2). Within the circle was the site of one of Ave-  
148 bury's largest stones, the Obelisk, which had been recorded and so-named by the eighteenth-  
149 century antiquary William Stukeley (Ucko *et al.* 1991). During excavation, Keiller discovered  
150 an unexpected 30.8m-long line of stoneholes that had formerly held megaliths to the west of  
151 the Obelisk. His excavations also unearthed a series of medieval stone burial pits (cut along  
152 the same line) that contained distinctive reddish sarsens, which were much smaller than other  
153 Avebury megaliths; the maximum dimensions of these stones ranged from 1.3–2.4m.  
154 Labelled by Keiller as the 'Z-feature', the presence of stoneholes perpendicular to the ends  
155 of the line (stones i and xi in Figure 2) hinted that these features may once have formed a  
156 rectangular setting (Smith 1965: 198–201, fig. 69). Keiller's excavations also revealed the  
157 stonehole for a megalith (stone D) that did not appear to be part of either circle or Z-feature,  
158 and a cluster of postholes, gullies and pits to the immediate north of the Obelisk. The Z-  
159 feature remains something of an enigma. Smith (1965: 250) suggested that if the excavated  
160 features were duplicated in reverse on the east side of the Obelisk, this megalithic component  
161 might resemble the stone kerb of an early Neolithic long barrow.

162 Critical re-evaluation of the Keiller excavation archive indicates that the excavated stone-  
163 holes were far too large for the Z-feature stones that Keiller re-erected into them. As a base-  
164 line, the excavated stoneholes of the main Southern Inner Circle ring (stones 102, 104,  
165 105–109; Figure 2) range from 1.7–2.5m in maximum length, and hold stones standing  
166 2.74–4.15m in height. With the exception of stonehole xii, which was genuinely intended  
167 for a small stone, the Z-feature stonehole dimensions fall comfortably within this range  
168 (Table 1). Thus, these stoneholes originally held much larger stones—equivalent in size to  
169 those making up the Southern Inner Circle. This explains the difficulty Keiller had in match-  
170 ing Z-feature stones to stoneholes, and his decision to raise these megaliths above the bases of  
171 'their' stoneholes, by between 0.15 and 0.40m, when re-erecting them (Smith 1965: 199).

## 173 **The antiquarian record**

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175 The earliest antiquarian records for the Southern Inner Circle comprise those made by John  
176 Aubrey and Walter Charleton in 1663, and William Stukeley's plan and written narrative

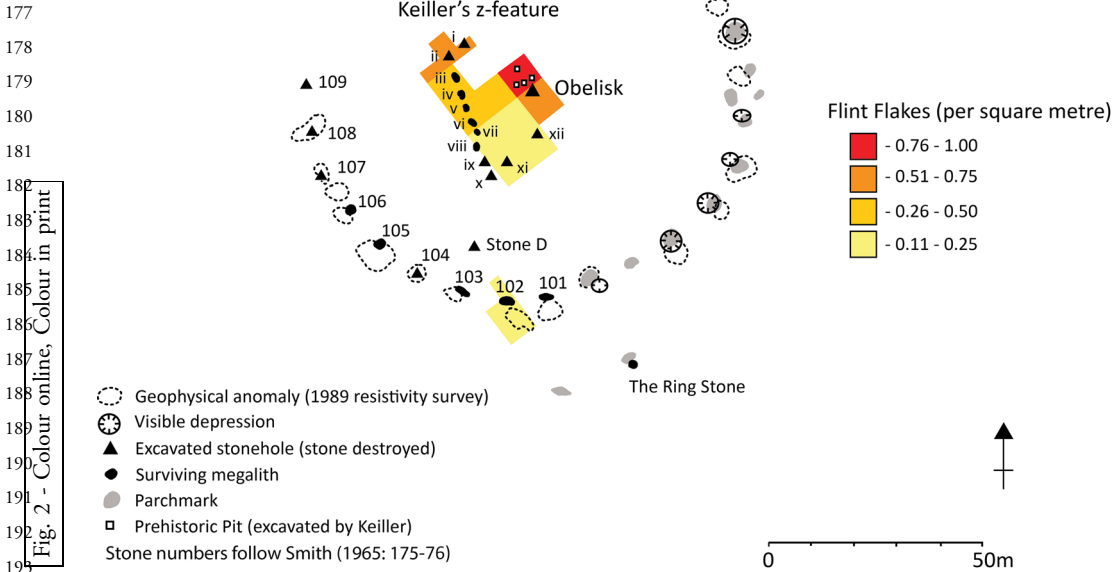


Figure 2. The Southern Inner Circle showing recovered lithic densities (figure by the authors).

compiled between 1719 and 1724. Ucko *et al.* (1991) discussed the veracity of these records in forensic detail, revealing few definitive areas of agreement between them. Charleton’s schematic plan, for example, depicts the Obelisk surrounded by a perfect circle of 13 megaliths. In contrast, Aubrey’s plan A offers a more confused picture of the Southern Inner Circle’s settings (Figure 3A). Aubrey mapped a portion of the Circle’s arc, within which he recorded four large stone positions and two smaller stone symbols annotated with the letter ‘Z’. To the north-east are three further stones and Aubrey makes no mention of the Obelisk. By the time Stukeley began recording the site 56 years later, a combination of entropy and active destruction had taken its toll. The Obelisk had fallen, and much of the complexity in layout hinted at by Aubrey was gone (Figure 3B). The presence of a single megalith standing in a somewhat anomalous location in the context of the Southern Inner Circle stones led Stukeley to propose the existence of a second concentric inner circle. Although Smith associated this anomalous stone with Keiller’s ‘stone D’, Ucko *et al.* (1991: 215–16) demonstrated that it corresponded instead to the location of Keiller’s stones ix, x and xi. Despite their insistence that it was “a small stone” (Ucko *et al.* 1991: 215–16), however, Stukeley’s drawings show a stone of substantial size, comparable in basal dimension to the main Southern Inner Circle stones—much larger than the stones of Keiller’s Z-feature (Figure 4). In this location, Keiller’s records show only a multi-lobate destruction pit, and his argument that this masked the stoneholes of three small Z-feature stones is questionable. On balance, the evidence suggests a more straightforward interpretation: this pit is related to a single, more substantial megalith.

## A Neolithic house

Within the Southern Inner Circle, Keiller excavated two features, which he labelled ‘Natural Fissure (?)’, and a cluster of gullies, pits and postholes to the immediate north of the Obelisk

Table 1. Dimensions of ‘Z-feature’ stoneholes. Southern Inner Circle (SIC) stoneholes have a mean maximum dimension of 2.07m and standard deviation of 0.27m

Keiller number	Smith re-numbering (1965)	Maximum dimension (metres)
ZX	i	2.00
Z1	ii	1.80
Z2	iii	2.40
Z3	iv	2.00
Z4	v	2.00
Z5	vi	–
Z6	vii	–
Z7	viii	2.30
Z8	ix	–
Z9	x	–
Z10	xi	2.50
Z11	xii	0.75

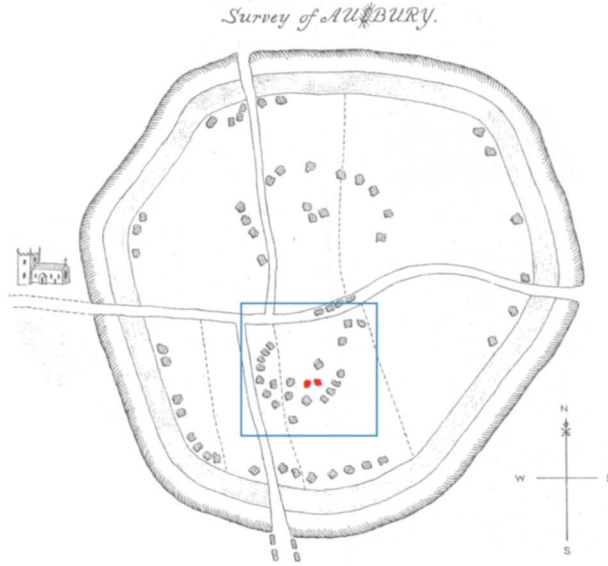
(Smith 1965) (Figure 5). This cluster included a series of shallow hollows (maximum 2.7 × 1.8m), which he interpreted as medieval marl pits. Of greater significance are the parallel lengths of gully, which define a structure approximately 6.9m wide and 6.8m long—although the southern extent has been affected by the destruction of the Obelisk. Running between these gullies was a line of three oval pits or postholes, with hints of a shallow slot linking the westernmost two (Figure 5). A fourth such pit was located on the approximate central axis to the north. While Keiller was content to assign a prehistoric date to these pits/postholes, he was confident that the gullies formed part of a much later, open-ended structure, presumably medieval in date. This, he surmised, had been opportunistically built against the fallen bulk of the Obelisk, using the latter as an ersatz rear wall. While Keiller toyed with the idea of the structure being a pigsty, his supervisor, W.E.V. Young, suggested that it may have been a cart shed. By the time that the fieldwork was formally published, these features had been reduced to the status of field boundary ditches (Smith 1965: fig. 69).

The medieval date assigned to the pits and structure can be questioned, as no medieval pottery was found within the gullies, and only three sherds were recovered from one of the pits. This is surprising, given the high density of twelfth- to fourteenth-century pottery recorded in the excavation archive that was recovered from the overlying soil (up to 100 sherds per 25ft/7.62m square). The three sherds of medieval pottery from the pit are probably intrusive, as rabbit burrows were recorded in the vicinity. The pits may even be naturally formed features (e.g. tree-throw pits) of prehistoric date. It is the gully-defined structure, however, that takes on particular significance, once Keiller’s unsupported claim for a medieval origin is rejected. Several lines of evidence, we argue, suggest a prehistoric—and specifically Early Neolithic—date for the structure:

- Its axis is parallel to the excavated line of Z-feature stoneholes, and it occupies the geometric centre of the Southern Inner Circle, which is located just north of the Obelisk.

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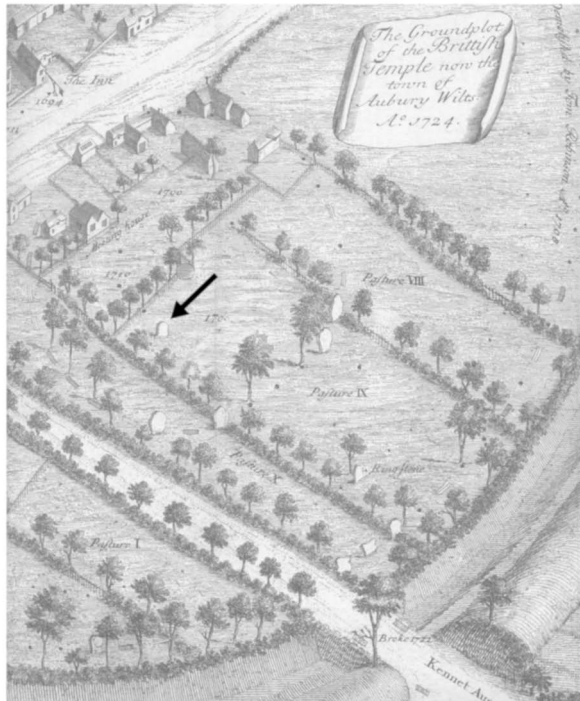


Fig. 3 - Colour online, Colour in print

Figure 3. A) Aubrey's 'RUDE SKETCH' (after Long 1858). Blue square denotes the Southern Inner Circle. The stones in red were originally drawn by Aubrey at half the size and marked with a 'Z' notation; B) Stukeley's Frontispiece (Stukeley 1743)—the single stone that had survived to the early eighteenth century is indicated by the arrow. It was subsequently destroyed.

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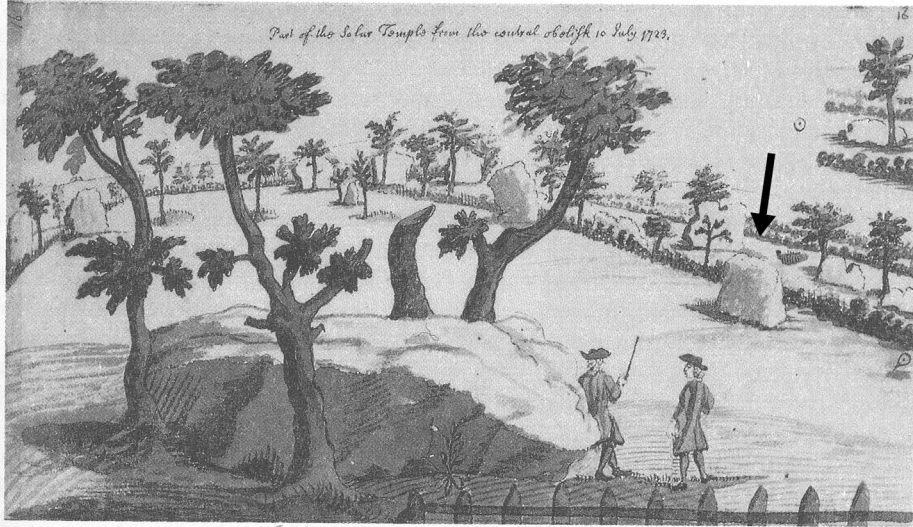
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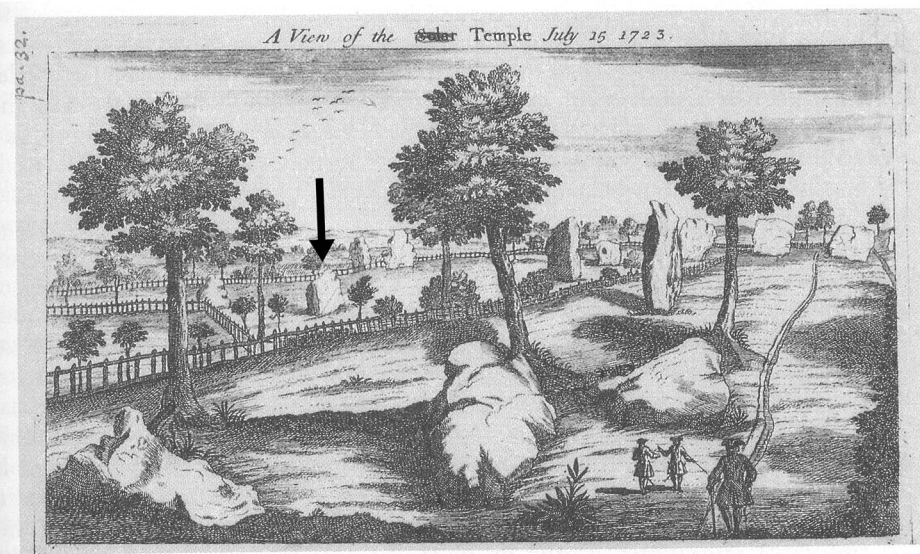


Fig. 4 - B/W online, B/W in print

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Figure 4. Stukeley's views of the Southern Inner Circle, with the surviving stone indicated: A) Stukeley 1743: tab XVI; B) Stukeley 1743: tab. XVII.

- It is associated with a localised spread of Neolithic worked flint and pottery, which is otherwise rare in the interior of the monument.
- The plan of the structure bears a remarkable resemblance to those of smaller Early Neolithic houses from Britain and Ireland.

The spread of Neolithic artefactual material includes 346 pieces of worked flint from soil contexts in the area of the Southern Inner Circle, comprising 334 flakes, nine scrapers, a knife, a



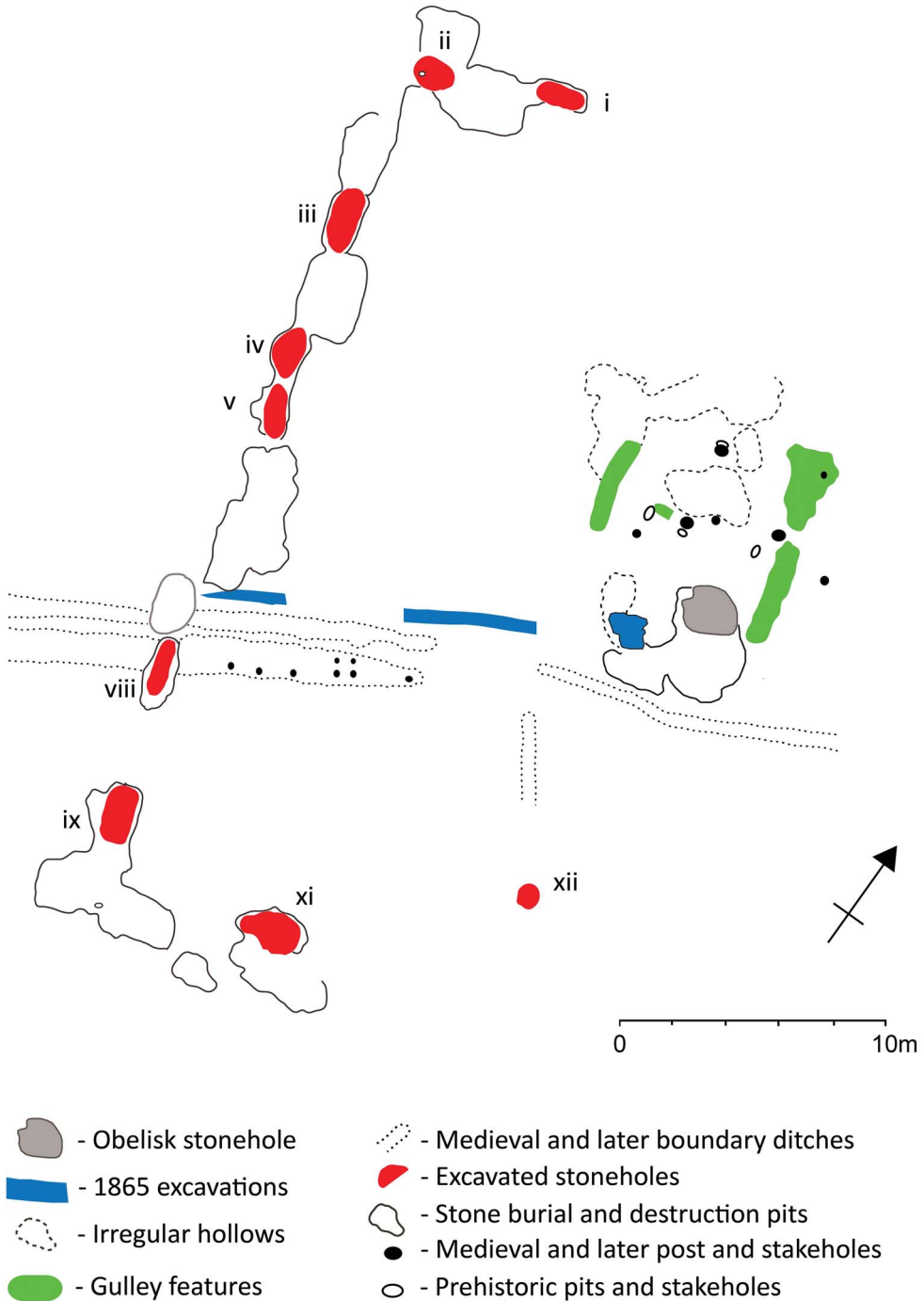


Figure 5. The features excavated and interpreted by Keiller in 1939. The '1865 excavations' refer to trenches dug in 1865 by A.C. Smith and W. Cunnington on behalf of the Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Society (Smith 1965: 183; Gillings & Pollard 2004: 167–68) (figure by the authors).

397 retouched flake and a polished axe. In addition, there are 138 worked flints from the Z-fea-  
398 ture stoneholes and burial pits, from features associated with the Obelisk, and from the gul-  
399 lies. Amongst this material are two awls, a fabricator, a knife and a bifacially retouched flake.  
400 The associated debitage includes blades, narrow flakes and several thinning flakes. Such an  
401 assemblage is consistent with an Early Neolithic domestic site. Smith (1965: 226) records  
402 the retrieval of 30 sherds of Early Neolithic bowl and undecorated Peterborough Ware  
403 from stoneholes 104–106, i, iv, viii and ix. Relatively fresh sherds of Neolithic bowl were  
404 recovered from stonehole x. The distribution of this material is particularly striking, as the  
405 greatest concentration of worked flint is focused on the gully-defined structure, with a lower-  
406 density ‘halo’ of approximately 20m radius around this (Figure 2). This distribution com-  
407 pares to the artefact spreads around the Early Neolithic buildings at Hazleton North and  
408 Ascot-under-Wychwood (Saville 1990; Benson & Whittle 2007).

409 The most expedient interpretation is that this structure is a Neolithic house. Keiller was correct  
410 to interpret the gullies as wall trenches, although, unfortunately, descriptions of fills and sections  
411 are lacking. Three of the prehistoric pits sit within the interior, central and perpendicular to the  
412 gullies. Their small diameter probably indicates that they are postholes for an internal division.  
413 The fourth pit is located at the end of the structure in a central, gable-end position. Taken  
414 together, they form a plan that has close parallels with several small post- and trench-constructed  
415 houses of the thirty-eighth to early thirty-seventh centuries cal BC from mainland Britain and  
416 Ireland (Smyth 2014; Gibson 2017; Figure 6). At close to  $7\text{m}^2$ , the Avebury structure falls com-  
417 fortably within the size range (Gibson 2017: fig. 14). Close parallels include Fengate, Cambridges-  
418 hire, Ballintaggart 1 and 3, County Down, Newrath, County Kilkenny and Horton, Berkshire  
419 (Pryor 1974; Barclay *et al.* 2012; Smyth 2014). The larger structure at White Horse Stone, Kent  
420 (Booth *et al.* 2011) was constructed within clear sight of a substantial sarsen spread, much as the  
421 Avebury building would have been (Gillings & Pollard 2016). This would be the first such Early  
422 Neolithic house to be identified in Wessex (Barclay & Harris 2017: 231).

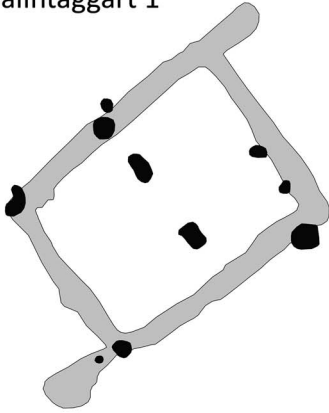
## 424 The 2017 survey

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426 To investigate further the possible connection between the house and the excavated portion  
427 of the Z-feature, more data are required. Since Keiller’s excavations, fieldwork in the South-  
428 ern Inner Circle has been limited to an inconclusive geophysical survey in 1989, alongside  
429 more ad hoc mapping of parch marks (Ucko *et al.* 1991: 220). More recent surveys else-  
430 where at Avebury have proven the efficacy of ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and soil  
431 resistance survey for the detection of buried sarsens (e.g. Gillings *et al.* 2008; Papworth  
432 2012). Given the known presence of large (between 15 and 100 tonnes), buried sarsen  
433 stones at Avebury in close association with highly compacted stoneholes, it is surprising  
434 that no previous large-scale GPR surveys have been attempted. This is despite the success  
435 of GPR in detecting buried megaliths on the Beckhampton Avenue (Gillings *et al.* 2008:  
436 64–66).

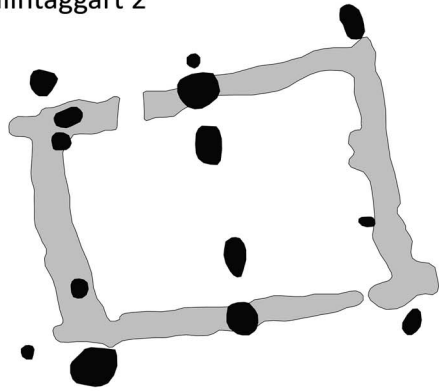
437 In April 2017, 0.567ha were surveyed to the east of the areas excavated by Keiller  
438 (Figure 1). Soil resistance survey was carried out using twin-probe and square arrays, and  
439 this was complemented by GPR (a technical report on the survey can be found in the online  
440 supplementary material (OSM)). The resistance results are presented in Figure 7, and display

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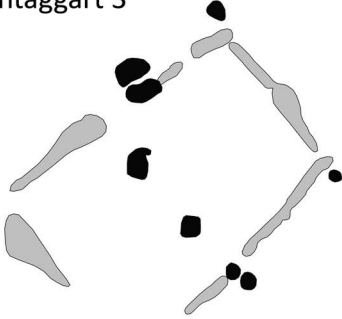
Balintaggart 1



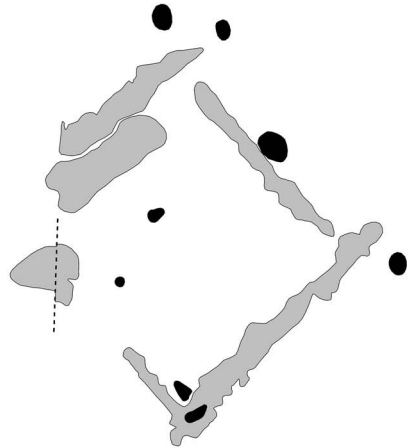
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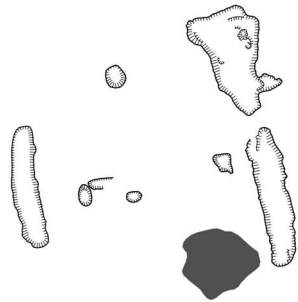
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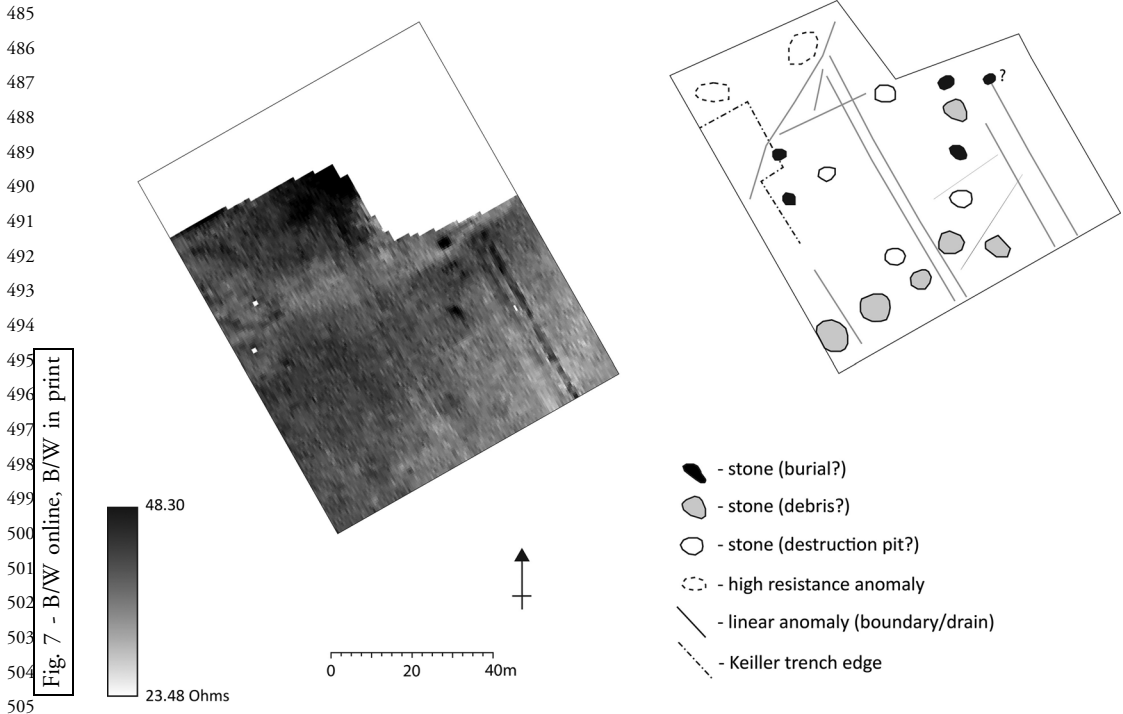


- - small pits, post and stakeholes
- ▭ - slot trenches and gulleys
- - stonehole of the Obelisk



Fig. 6 - B/W online, B/W in print

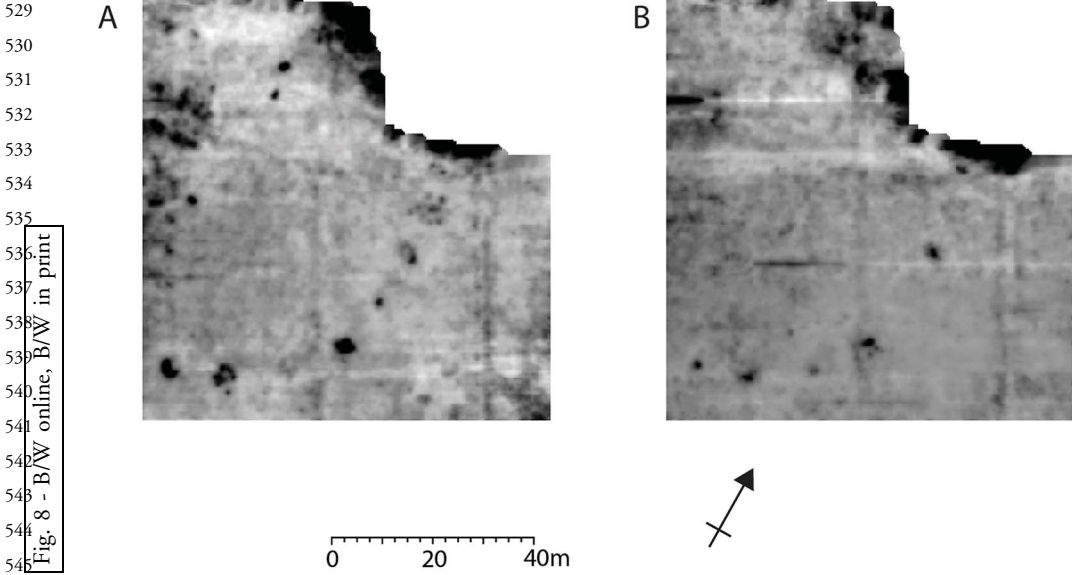
Figure 6. The Early Neolithic house structure in the centre of the Southern Inner Circle and comparators (figure by the authors).



506 *Figure 7. Results of the soil resistance survey carried out across the Southern Inner Circle with interpretation (for a*  
507 *location plan of the surveyed area, please see Figure 1) (figure by the authors).*

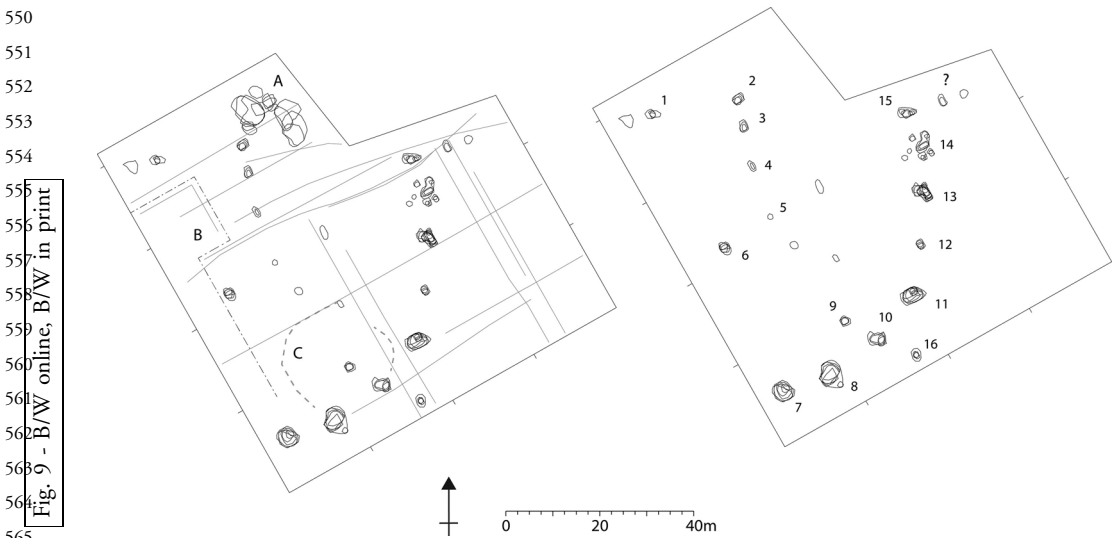
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510 several anomalies indicative of former megaliths. These take the form of discrete high-  
511 high-resistance anomalies (marking buried stones), moderately high responses (indicating either  
512 deeply buried stones or concentrations of stone debris) and lower-resistance features (destruc-  
513 tion pits). Some of these had been previously identified as hollows by Keiller, and as general-  
514 ised anomalies in the 1989 survey; several had not been identified at all. There are also  
515 south-east- to north-west- (and perpendicularly) aligned linear features corresponding to former  
516 boundaries—some of which are clearly visible in the field as earthworks—along with  
517 probable drainage features. Although not indicated on the interpretation plot, it is interesting  
518 to note that the interior of the Southern Inner Circle seems to be characterised by higher  
519 resistance. The south-west to north-east band of low resistance crossing the top third of  
520 the plot (Figure 7) probably reflects the complex sequence of medieval and post-medieval  
521 boundary ditches that criss-cross this area (Gillings *et al.* 2008: fig. 8.8).

522 Several clear anomalies are visible in the time-sliced GPR results, from the surface to a  
523 depth of 3.1m (Figure 8). An interpretation is presented in Figure 9, in which the level of  
524 re-inscription (i.e. over-drawing) can be read as a direct proxy for the persistence of the fea-  
525 tures with depth. Alongside linear medieval property boundaries and the general ‘noise’ adja-  
526 cent to the modern gardens, 16 stone-related (1–16) and three other features (A–C) have  
527 been identified (see Figure 8 and Table 2). Feature A is adjacent to a modern boundary  
528 and manifests as a zone of high resistance, as well as an amorphous GPR anomaly; it probably



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Figure 8. Key GPR depth slices extracted at depths of 0.6–0.9m (A) and 1.2–1.6m (B). Plans of all of the extracted depth slices are provided in the technical report that has been included as online supplementary material (figure by the authors).



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Figure 9. GPR interpretation combining anomalies identified in the sequential depth slices. In this figure, the level of re-inscription (i.e. over-drawing) acts as a direct proxy for the persistence of the features with depth (figure by the authors).

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derives from medieval and/or post-medieval building activity. Feature B is the edge of Keil-ler’s 1939 excavation trench. Other anomalies, however, correspond to elements of Neolithic monumental architecture:

Table 2. Maximum dimensions and depths of buried sarsens.

Anomaly	Maximum dimension of GPR response (m)	Maximum depth at which anomaly detected (m)
1	2.6	1.1–1.4
2	2.7	1.1–1.4
3	2.4	0.8–1.1
6	2.8	1.2–1.6
7	4.2	1.4–1.7
8	4.5	1.4–1.7
11	4.8	1.7–2.0
13	4.1	2.2–2.5
15	3.7	1.4–1.7

Maximum dimension range for excavated Z-stones = 1.3–2.4m; maximum dimension range for Southern Inner Circle stones (allowing a metre for the unexposed base) = 3.74–5.15m

- Feature C: a sub-circular feature evident in the GPR data at a depth between 0.5 and 0.9m below the present surface. This appears to comprise a series of discrete, small circular anomalies that are probably postholes or pits.
- Features 1–3 & 6: buried sarsens associated with the continuation of the Z-feature setting.
- Features 4– 5: destruction pits or debris relating to the continuation of the Z-feature setting.
- Features 7–8, 11, 13 & 15: substantial, deeply buried sarsens of the Southern Inner Circle.
- Features 10 & 12: probable destruction pits (low resistance) and the compressed bases of megalithic stoneholes (GPR reflection) of the Southern Inner Circle.
- Features 9 & 16: probable destruction pits (low resistance) and compressed stone sockets (GPR reflection) relating to a pair of stones that form a linear alignment with anomalies 10 and 6.
- Feature 14: a spread of large fragments of sarsen or packing stones, resulting from the destruction of a substantial Southern Inner Circle sarsen.
- Feature ?: a possible stone position visible in the GPR data (depths 0.3–0.6m), but partially masked by debris relating to the modern boundary. Later boundaries tend to align on standing stones (see Gillings *et al.* 2008: fig. 8.8).

Features 1–6 mirror the position of the excavated Z-feature stoneholes. Taken together, they form a 30 × 30m square megalithic setting that has been aligned to echo the principle axes of the house. The maximum dimension of the GPR responses for the buried sarsens have been recorded as a proxy for the size of the buried stone, along with an estimate of the depth of the burial pit (Table 2). Anomalies 1–3 and 6 fall at the upper end of the size range for the smaller Z-stones, while 7, 8, 11, 13 and 15 are comparable in size to the main Southern Inner Circle megaliths. In all cases, the depth of burial is within the known range (Gillings *et al.* 2008: 25, tab. 9.1). Enough of this megalithic square had survived into the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries for both Aubrey and Stukeley to record its remnants. This suggests that the constituent megaliths had not been dismantled or reconfigured in prehistory. The excavated sarsens and the unusually large stoneholes encountered by Keiller indicate a mixture of larger

617 and smaller stones. If set in alternate fashion, the result would form a contrast between the  
618 grey of the larger sarsens and the distinctive orange-red of the surviving Z-stones. The mega-  
619 lithic square is a highly unusual monument in its own right, the closest parallel being the  
620 ‘cove’ inside [site IV](#) at Mount Pleasant in Dorset (Wainwright 1979: 28–31). At 36m<sup>2</sup>, how-  
621 ever, the latter is considerably smaller.

622 Additional newly identified features include the sub-circular anomaly seemingly cut by the  
623 Southern Inner Circle (Figure 9: feature C) and two lines of stoneholes radiating from the  
624 centre. The former is reminiscent of a double concentric circular anomaly identified by  
625 Ucko *et al.* (1991: pl. 67) in the Northern Inner Circle. Of the latter, the south-west running  
626 line comprises the Obelisk, stone xi, stonehole D, stone 103 of the Southern Inner Circle and  
627 a rectangular feature recorded by Keiller as a ‘natural fissure that may well be a stonehole. The  
628 south-east running line comprises stonehole xii and features 6, 9, 10 and 16. These radiating  
629 lines were wholly unexpected and invite comparison with the radial palisade fence at the  
630 nearby West Kennet Palisades (Figure 1) (Whittle 1997; Barber 2013: 234–35, fig. 8.2).  
631 A Google Earth overlay file (in .kmz format) recording the locations of the megaliths revealed  
632 by the surveys has been included in the OSM.

## 633 **The sequence reconsidered**

634 Our preferred structural sequence for these newly identified features begins with the putative  
635 house, followed by the erection of the Obelisk and the square stone setting, and then the con-  
636 struction of the Southern Inner Circle and associated lines (Figure 10 & Table 3). The cir-  
637 cular anomaly may pre-date the Southern Inner Circle, but direct dating evidence is currently  
638 lacking. By analogy with other Early Neolithic structures, the putative house should date to  
639 the second quarter of the fourth millennium BC. Sherds of Neolithic bowl and Peterborough  
640 Ware from stoneholes i, iv, viii and ix of the square setting are presumably residual (Smith  
641 1965: 226), although some appear quite fresh. Perhaps this and the Obelisk were constructed  
642 in the late fourth or early third millennia BC—a period that might also have witnessed the  
643 erection of the Cove stones inside the Northern Inner Circle (Gillings *et al.* 2008: 164–65).  
644 The radiating lines form a final megalithic phase. They each have a different origin point and  
645 both appear to have been carefully keyed into stones of the square and Southern Inner Circle,  
646 implying that the former were already in place. Smith (1965: 227) claimed there were weath-  
647 ered sherds of Beaker (in fact in an Early Bronze Age fabric) from beneath clay packing in a  
648 stake-hole close to the edge of stonehole D, but the stake-hole cannot be definitively related to  
649 the stonehole. Overall, we may be seeing activity spanning as much as 1500 years, from the  
650 Early Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age.

## 653 **Conclusion**

654 If our new interpretation of the structure within the Southern Inner Circle as an Early Neo-  
655 lithic house is correct, the implications for understanding Avebury’s origins are profound: the  
656 ancestry of one of Europe’s great megalithic monuments can be traced back to the monumen-  
657 talisation of a relatively modest dwelling. This supports Julian Thomas’s (2013: 294) view  
658 that fourth-millennium BC tombs and houses/halls played an active role in the creation  
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Figure 10. The newly revealed structural detail of the Southern Inner Circle (incorporates data (c) Crown Copyright/ database right 2007; an Ordnance Survey/(EDINA) supplied service) (figure by the authors).

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and commemoration of foundational social groups. Eventually encased within the centre of the 'deepest' space of the henge, we hypothesise that it was the connections that this erstwhile building had with a significant, perhaps founder, lineage that led to it taking on a (mytho-) historic importance; and for the status of the site to move from the quotidian to the sacred. Avebury is not unique in this transformation from 'mundane' to monumental structure. The process is evidenced at several Neolithic monuments, such as in the construction of earlier fourth-millennium BC chambered tombs over former houses at Hazleton North, Gloucestershire (Saville 1990), and the later reworking of large free-standing buildings or halls into



Table 3. Suggested phases of activity

Description	Comments
House	First phase of structural activity
Obelisk, erected in south-east corner of former house	After house structure had decayed, perhaps surviving as a low earthwork
30m-diameter square setting of megaliths (large and small)	Respecting the axial orientation and centred upon the house
Post or pit circle truncated by Southern Inner Circle	Potentially an early feature
100m-diameter circle of large sarsens (Southern Inner Circle) centred upon house and square	Contemporaneous with (or following) square setting
Linear stone settings radiating to the south-east and south-west	Keyed into the stone positions of the Southern Inner Circle and square; truncating the post/pit circle

henges and timber and stone circles at Stenness, Orkney and Coneybury, Wiltshire (Bradley 2003; Pollard 2012; Richards 2013). What marks out Avebury as exceptional is the heightened significance and long-term resonance of this act of ontological transformation.

The Early Neolithic house at Avebury would have lasted perhaps only a generation or two; the collapsed daub walls would probably have left a visible earthwork that was subsequently afforded careful respect. Later acts of pit digging and artefact deposition highlight the long-term memory work that could attend the visible traces of Early Neolithic houses. Hey *et al.* (2016: 60), for example, highlight the deliberate digging and filling of later Neolithic pits containing Grooved Ware into the house/hall sites at Yarnton (Oxfordshire), White Horse Stone (Kent) and Littleour (Fife). A Middle Neolithic pit group was carefully dug between the traces of two early fourth-millennium BC houses at Llanfaethlu, Anglesey (Rees & Jones 2015), while at Cat’s Water, Fengate, Cambridgeshire, pits containing Peterborough Ware were dug along the edge of a centuries-old house (Pryor 2001: 48–49).

Since its unexpected discovery in 1939, the Z-feature at Avebury has presented an interpretative conundrum. Smith (1965: 251) came close to our preferred explanation when she proposed a link with Early Neolithic funerary architecture, in that the settings within the Southern Inner Circle deliberately echo elements of a long barrow, with the Obelisk representing a burial deposit. Instead of a tomb, however, the Z-feature settings can now be considered to commemorate a form of domestic architecture. The temporal currency of that commemorative reference was extended through further monumental elaboration. Neolithic house forms in Britain changed over time, from square and rectilinear to more oval and rounded later forms (Smyth 2014). It may be that an explicit link with concepts of the house and household was maintained at Avebury; the subsequent enclosure of the square megalithic setting and erstwhile house by the Southern Inner Circle may replicate—on a truly monumental scale—the square-in-circle format of later Neolithic houses and halls (Bradley 2003).

749 Finally, given the frequency with which Early Neolithic houses in Britain and Ireland  
750 occur in pairs or small groups, we might expect there to be more evidence of this at Avebury.  
751 Indeed, the Cove that sits in the centre of the Northern Inner Circle, amidst a confusing array  
752 of un-investigated stone settings, may be a good candidate for a second foundational building.

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## 757 Supplementary material

758 To view supplementary material for this article, please visit [https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.  
759 2019.37](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.37)

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