

Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited	
Journal Code: OJOA	Proofreader: Mony
Article No: OJOA12056	Delivery date: 29 May 2015
Page Extent: 27	

1
2
3 **MARK GILLINGS**
4

5 **BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE**
6 **MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN**
7

8
9 *Summary. This paper calls attention to a previously neglected element of the*
10 *broad repertoire of monumental megalithic structures that characterize the*
11 *later third and second millennia BC across the British Isles – extremely small*
12 *standing stones. Despite their frequency and the complex arrangements and*
13 *associations they embody, these miniliths are rarely recorded in detail and*
14 *frequently marginalized to a generic background. As a result, they are largely*
15 *absent from interpretative accounts. Drawing upon recent debates regarding*
16 *materiality and monument form, alongside the results of excavations explicitly*
17 *targeting tiny stone settings, the discussion argues that the phenomenon of*
18 *raising and fixing small uprights was not only widespread and persistent, but*
19 *sheds important light upon the beliefs and ideas driving monument*
20 *construction during the later Neolithic and Bronze Ages.*

21
22 **INTRODUCTION – THE USE OF SMALL STANDING STONES**

23 Slightly in front of the top layer of packing stones another sarsen was found lying on the
24 chalk. It was quite definitely in its original position but could have served no practical purpose
25 where it was. Indeed it gave the impression of having been deliberately placed where it was
26 found. This is interesting since this stone did not in itself resemble a supporting or a packing
27 stone, but in shape was of a pure B.1 form in miniature The writer is inclined to suggest that
28 this may have been a betyl stone placed . . . for some ritual purpose (Alexander Keiller,
29 unpublished draft excavation report, writing of Stone 33 of Avebury's outer circle – the
30 smallest of the surviving Avebury uprights (Smith 1965, 196)).

31
32 This discussion seeks better to understand a group of unique megalithic structures that have
33 been recorded on the uplands of Exmoor in south-west Britain (Fig. 1). This is a group of
34 monuments whose distinctiveness arises from the very small upright stones – miniliths – that
35 are their defining characteristic. Central to this is a careful reconsideration of the role (and
36 perceived importance) of very small stones in the construction and subsequent life of
37 monuments in prehistory, situating the practices taking place on Exmoor within the British

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

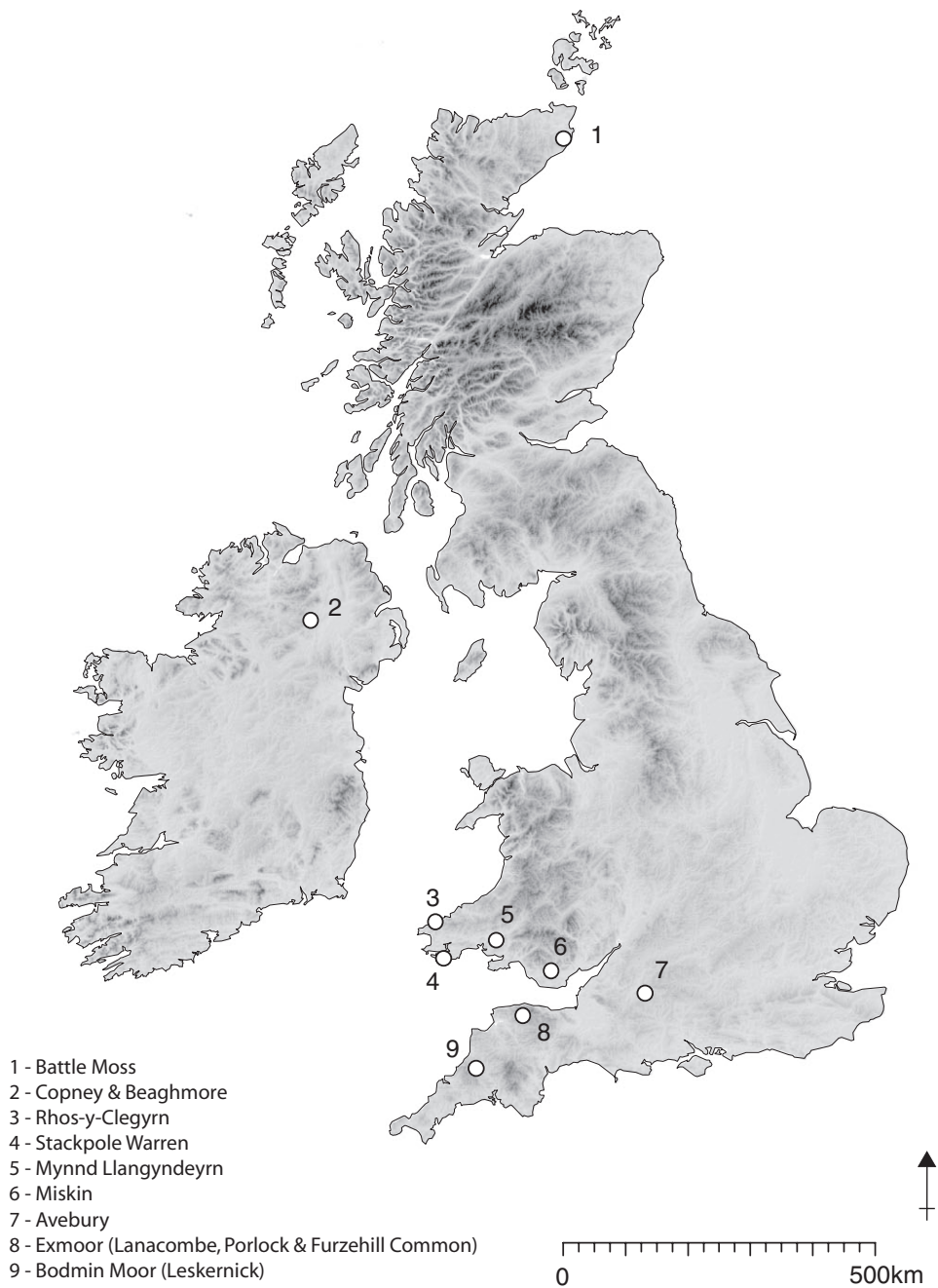


Figure 1
General location of the sites discussed in the text.

1
2

MARK GILLINGS

1 Isles more broadly. As will become clear, far from being unique or unusual, tiny standing
2 stones were a prominent element in a broad monumental repertoire that was actively drawn
3 upon in a host of local, often highly contingent ways during the later third and second
4 millennia BC. As to their relative invisibility in academic accounts, this, it is argued, is a
5 consequence of the way in which we record stones, relegating smaller examples to the
6 background in our interpretative accounts.

7 Rather than approaching the problem through the lens of the monument, the approach
8 adopted here has been to work up from the detail of individual standing stones, treating the
9 overall monumental form as a consequence rather than defining imperative. Arguing that we
10 need to approach monuments not as coherent, planned structures but instead as motleys or
11 assemblages – the results (or residues) left behind by a series of disparate imperatives and
12 initiatives – is hardly new (Lucas 2012, 204; see Richards 2013 for a recent review). Neither
13 is the notion that the wide (and often perplexing) range of monumental structures we
14 encounter were the result of local expressions of what have been described as ‘simple ideas’
15 whose currency spanned the British Isles (Bradley 2007, 174). For example, in his discussion
16 of the recumbent stone circles of north-east Scotland, Bradley has argued that individual
17 monuments dynamically embodied a range of ideas and concepts ‘that were current over a
18 larger area during the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age. These might not have been conceived
19 as architectural or structural devices, so much as the embodiment of certain beliefs’ (2005,
20 113; 2011, 97). The latter could relate to the manipulation of certain materials, recurrent
21 patterns of orientation, adherence to archetypal configurations such as the circle, or the
22 metaphoric expression of underlying structuring principles such as ‘wrapping’ and enclosure
23 (Richards 2013). That individual groups, separated in space and time, may have been drawing
24 creatively upon a shared pool of concepts and ways-of-doing would certainly account for the
25 presence across the British Isles of structures whose superficial similarities invite tidy
26 classification, yet whose similarities begin to break down as soon as the detail is placed under
27 scrutiny (Williams 1988, 54).

28 Taken together, these perspectives offer a productive way of considering monuments,
29 which moves beyond the inherently reductive and generalizing tendencies that characterize more
30 classificatory approaches. If monuments are dynamic expressions of a series of themes/motifs/
31 ideas that may not be explicit from the final form of the structure, then the archaeological project
32 becomes one of identifying and charting these expressions and the relationships that were
33 instantiated between them. The current paper seeks to build upon such debates through the
34 development of four main arguments. The first is that the deployment of extremely small
35 standing stones was a ubiquitous, yet hitherto unacknowledged, characteristic of the complex
36 and varied range of monument types that had currency in the latter part of the third and
37 throughout the second millennia BC. Second, the decision to erect miniliths represents precisely
38 the kind of citation and creative manifestation of a shared idea identified by researchers such as
39 Bradley; one that was played out in a host of regional, local and often highly contingent ways.
40 Third, if the archaeological goal is to identify and characterize the beliefs made manifest in any
41 given monument or group of such, it follows that we need to look carefully and critically at the
42 activities involved in translating, expressing and materializing such ideas, for example the
43 practices involved in raising, fixing and dismantling tiny uprights. Fourth, hampering such
44 investigation at present is the lack of archaeological attention afforded to these features; as will
45 be seen, small standing stones have been relegated to the background in our discussions when
46 mentioned at all.

MARK GILLINGS

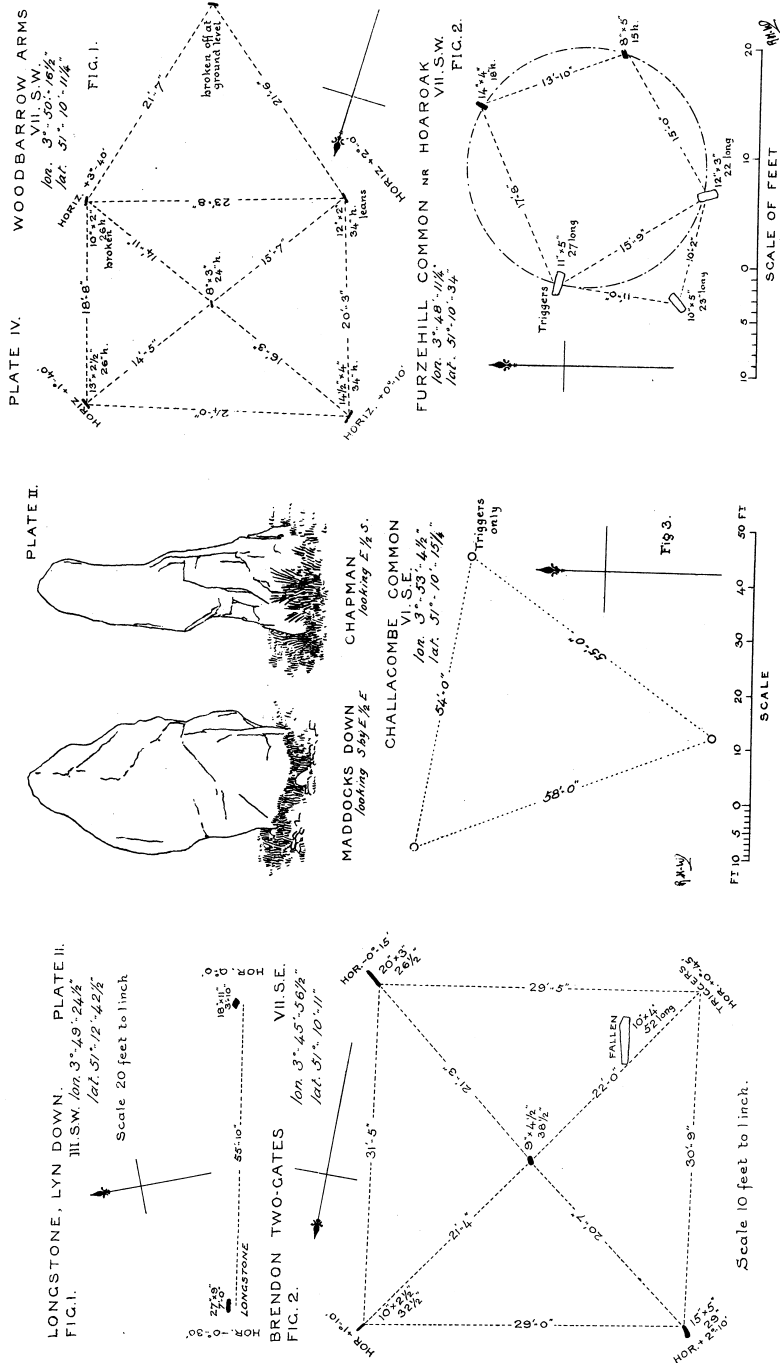


Figure 2 Geometric and quasi-geometric settings (from Chanter and Worth 1905; 1906).

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN



Figure 3

Minilithic settings on Exmoor (A – Porlock stone row; B – Porlock Circle (c) Barry Hitchcox; C – Lanacombe I), by author unless otherwise stated.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21

cairn. Cooney's basic argument, and it is a persuasive one, is that in eliding such material engagements from our narratives we may be unnecessarily restricting and limiting interpretational possibilities (ibid., 67–70).

Perhaps the most obvious way in which small stones are effectively excluded from discussion is through recording, and the imposition of an implicit size threshold above which individual stones are deemed significant and below which they are subsumed into a greater whole. Even in those rare cases where researchers have explicitly set out to consider *all* stones in a megalithic monument, thresholds are evident (e.g. Clare's decision to exclude stones that 'barely protrude above the grass' from his study on megalith size (2010, 246)). The latter forms of anonymity can be purely descriptive, such as 'stone row' or 'circle', a measured average (such as typical stone height – e.g. Johnson and Rose 1994, 33, table 6) or both. Perhaps more subtle is the tendency to assume very small megaliths were broken-off 'stumps', with the implication that they were once much more substantial (e.g. Grinsell 1970, 39). Take, for example, descriptions of the partly excavated stone row at Leskernick, Bodmin. The excavators describe the monument thus: 'The stone row is just over 300m in length, oriented ENE-WSW and terminates at a "U"-shaped formation of three substantial, part turf-covered, recumbent stones just short of the cairn. The rest of the row consists of 47 small, low, and square-topped stones,

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

1 Perhaps more important than the application of a rigid set of criteria is that researchers be
2 encouraged to pause before the application of *any* cut-off, however commonsensical it might at
3 first seem.

4
5 MINILITHIC MONUMENTS

6 In the case of the Copney Stone Circles, County Tyrone, peat clearance revealed a
7 complex of over 100 stone circles taking a variety of forms yet sharing a similar preference for
8 small upright stones (0.1–0.5 m in height) (Fig. 4). Associated with a number of the circles are
9 alignments of paired stones – one large and one small, extending up to 50 m from the circles
10 themselves (Foley and MacDonagh 1998, 24). Three circles were cleared of peat but not
11 subjected to any further excavation. Fully exposed, Circle A was 16 m in diameter, its perimeter
12 defined by 130 close-spaced stones enclosing over 300 small uprights (typically 0.2 m high)
13 radiating in lines from a central cairn (ibid., 27). The perimeter of Circle B (18 m in diameter)
14 enclosed over 500 standing stones (typically 0.3 m in height) in a series of concentric circles.
15 This concentric pattern was mirrored in Circle C, the largest investigated (24 m in diameter),
16 although only a quadrant of the latter was cleared of peat. Extending from Circle B was a parallel
17 alignment of paired large (0.4–0.8 m) and small (0.13–0.32 m) uprights.

18 Some 11 km to the north-east of Copney, the Beaghmore complex comprises seven
19 irregular stone circles along with eight stone alignments and 15 cairns. Excavations carried out
20 between 1945–9 revealed 1269 standing stones sealed beneath the peat (Fig. 5). As at Copney,
21 there is evidence of deliberate pairing between large and small stones – take, for example, the
22 paired alignments L6 (of stones 0.94 m in height) and L5 (described merely as consisting of
23 ‘numerous small stones’) (May and Mitchell 1953, 179). Of most interest is Circle E, whose
24 interior was ‘evenly studded with 884 small stones’ (ibid., 184) that Thom later recorded as
25 standing to a typical height of 0.38 m (Thom 1980, 16). As for patterning within this spread, the
26 excavator noted the presence of both curves and lines. These are certainly evident on the
27 published plan (reproduced in part in Fig. 5), but the degree to which the latter was measured (as
28 opposed to impressionistic) is unclear (May and Mitchell 1953, 185). Although the site was
29 subsequently surveyed by Thom as part of an astronomical investigation, the small stones were
30 (rather tellingly) excluded from his published plan, Circle E being represented as a simple ring.
31 Aligned at a tangent to the perimeter of Circle E is a paired large–small alignment (L7 and L8;
32 May and Mitchell 1953, pl. XXXV), the stones making up L7 the largest on the site (see Fig. 5).

33 At neither site do we have information regarding the way in which the small megaliths
34 were erected and fixed in place; in both cases the emphasis was on revealing the plan. As a result,
35 we have no idea whether the practices used to raise the large/small stones comprising the paired
36 alignments were shared or different, or, for example, how the 884 stones filling Beaghmore
37 Circle E were set in place. The same could not be said of the well-excavated site of Stackpole
38 Warren in Pembrokeshire, where a similar play between megaliths large and small is in evidence.
39 Partly overlying the site of an earlier Bronze Age roundhouse, a setting of over 2000 small
40 upright stones was associated with a large standing stone (the Devil’s Quoit, a limestone slab
41 2.4 m in maximum dimension) and a short alignment of water-worn stones (Fig. 6). Dating to the
42 later Bronze Age, the stone setting covered a trapezoidal area of 16 x 8 m with a stone-free zone
43 along the centre. That this was not a haphazard or ad hoc collection is suggested by the uniform
44 shape of the individual stones and their configuration. The component miniliths were in the main
45 of limestone and elongated in shape, 0.1–0.3 m in length (with the bulk falling within the range

MARK GILLINGS

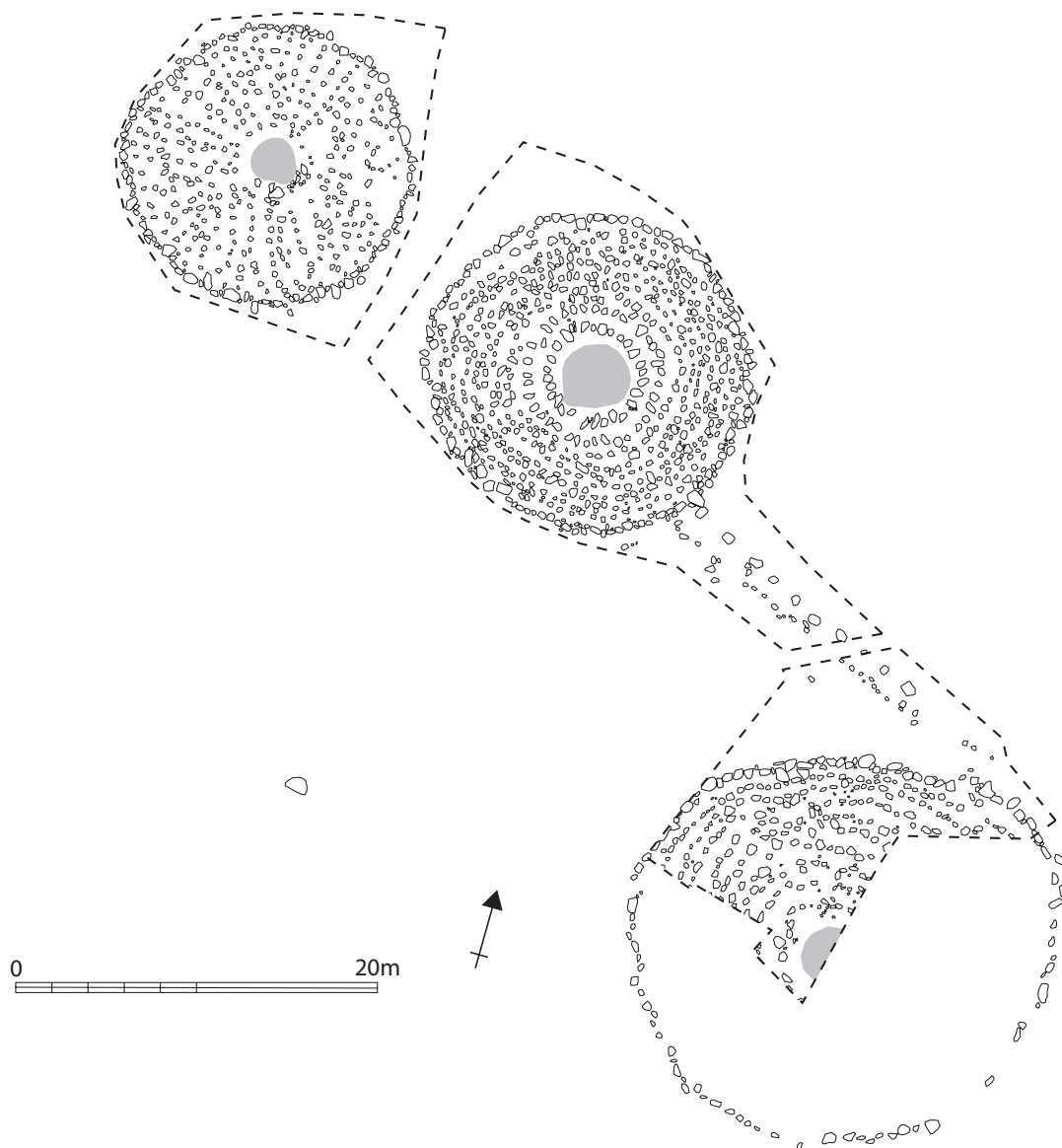
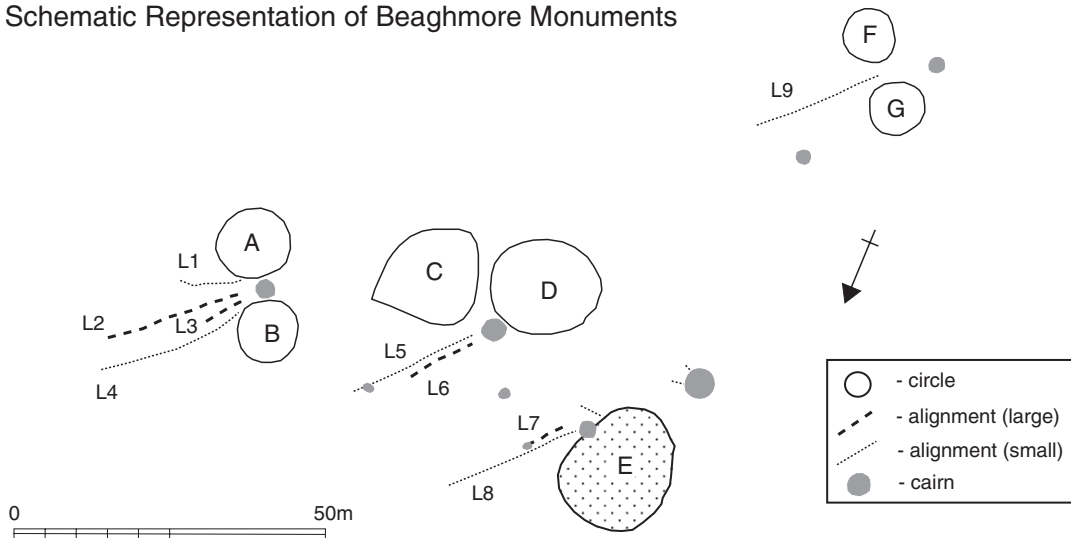


Figure 4
The Copney Circles (after Foley and MacDonagh 1998).

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
0.18–0.25 m). The majority were wedge-shaped, with the point forming the base, and all were originally thought to have been set upright in a series of irregular rows running parallel to the long axis of the spread (Benson *et al.* 1990, 190). The suggestion is of careful selection, movement and placement; over 2000 discrete and meaningful material acts. Precise phasing is uncertain but, as noted, a substantial standing stone was erected on the axis of the setting at the south-west end (*ibid.*, 194, fig. 15) along with a 4 m alignment of five upright, rounded boulders

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

Schematic Representation of Beaghmore Monuments



Circle E

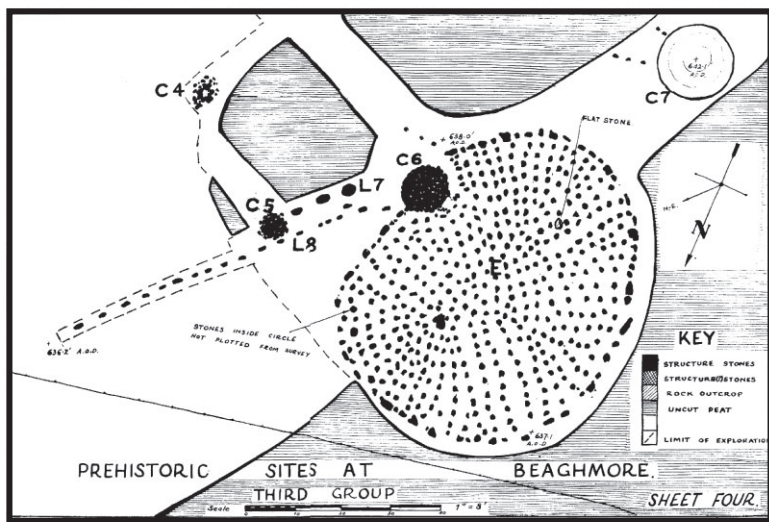
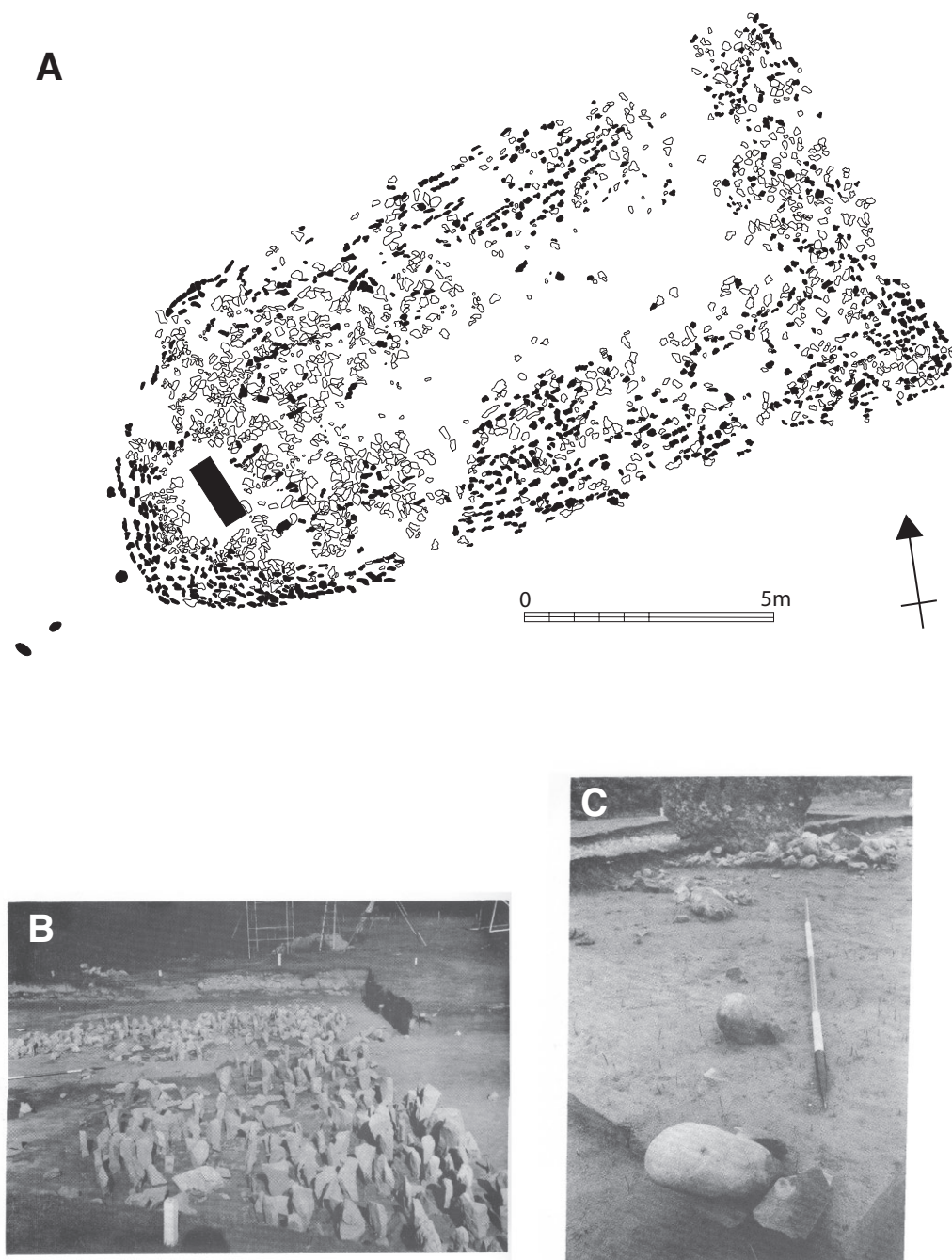


Figure 5
The Beaghmore monuments (after May and Mitchell 1953; Burl 1976).

1
2

MARK GILLINGS



1
2
3

Figure 6

Stackpole Warren (A – plan of stone settings (after Benson *et al.* 1990); B – the stones of the setting; C – the line of rounded boulders (from Benson *et al.* 1990)).

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

1 (c.0.2–0.3 m in maximum dimension) that served to continue the axial alignment to the south-
2 west (ibid.; Williams 1988, 99). Unfortunately, whilst there is extensive discussion of the
3 technology and stages involved in raising the 2.4 m long megalith, the small elongated stones are
4 described simply as being ‘set’. No detail is given as to how exactly this was effected – the
5 published sections give no indication of any cuts or sockets associated with the stones so the
6 assumption must be that they were pushed sharp end first into the ground surface; the same
7 applies to the alignment of rounded stones (Benson *et al.* 1990, fig. 8).

8 Where careful record has been made of the technologies used to raise small standing
9 stones, the results have been unexpected. For example, recent fieldwork on the multiple stone
10 rows of Battle Moss, one of a group of such sites in Caithness, has provided useful detail on the
11 practices that attended the raising and fixing into place of small megaliths (Fig. 7). The site
12 originally comprised eight approximately parallel rows of c.160 stones – typically 0.3 m in
13 height – stretching for a distance of c.40 m, with the easternmost row extending for a further
14 77 m or so (Canmore record no. 9021; Caithness Archaeological Trust 2004). Excavation carried
15 out in 2003 on an area encompassing seven stones revealed that each had been placed in a
16 deliberately dug narrow slot lined with clay and/or turf, the stone being held in place by packing
17 stones pushed in at each side. A layer of what was interpreted as redeposited natural was then
18 used to create a low platform around each upright stone (Baines *et al.* 2003, 95), practices more
19 in common with conventional megalithic settings.

20 The observed pattern of a conventional megalith set at one end of a smaller stone setting
21 seen at Stackpole Warren was echoed, albeit on a less impressive scale, at the sites of Miskin and
22 Mynydd Llangydeyrn 17 in south Wales (Fig. 8). At the former, a ‘boat-shaped’ spread of small,
23 irregular stones extended 1.45 m from the edge of a 1.2 m high pennant sandstone upright,
24 described variously by the excavator as capping or paving (Vyner 1977, 19). In the stonehole of
25 the standing stone was a substantial slab of the same sandstone laid hard against the northern
26 edge along with a whetstone and a small number of rounded pebbles. The former was argued to
27 have been broken from the top of the megalith prior to erection; none of the stones found in the
28 stonehole functioned as packing (ibid., 22; Williams 1988, 80–1). At Mynydd Llangydeyrn 17,
29 a similar low, flat spread of irregular stones extended 1.6 m to the east of a 1 m high megalith,
30 both located within a cleared area in a natural stone spread (Ward 1983, 42–3). Once again the
31 stonehole fills were unusual; in this case smaller stones were wedged between the ends of the
32 long axis of the stone and the stonehole cut, effectively bisecting the stonehole. Distinctive soils
33 were then used to fill the two sides. Assigning the spread of stones a symbolic role, the excavator
34 drew attention to the apparent play between large and small stones evident at the site, suggesting
35 a deliberate referencing of the broader chambered tomb tradition of combining orthostats with
36 accumulations of small stone (ibid., 46).

37 One of the most subtle, yet striking instances of this complex interplay between
38 megalith and minilith was encountered at the moorland site of Rhos-y-Clegyrn in
39 Pembrokeshire, where an oval spread of what was described as cobbling extended to the north
40 of a 2.74 m high standing stone of local igneous rock (Fig. 9). Needless to say, no details are
41 given as to the stones making up this spread, but directly adjacent to the stone on the east side
42 and cutting the edge of the stonehole was a small pit filled with a clean blue-white clay that
43 contained two further upright stones, described as pillar-shaped. The first was of sandstone and
44 stood 0.30 m above the base of the pit, sitting directly upon two sherds of pottery; the second
45 (geology not specified) was only 0.11 m in height and gains only the barest mention in the
46 published report. The first of these is likely to have just poked above the ground surface. A further

MARK GILLINGS



Figure 7

1
2 **2** Plan of Battle Moss stone rows and 2003 excavation (after Dryden, H. and Shearer, R.T. 1871, Battle Moss, Loch
3 of Yarrows, plan of stones with measurements and annotations (Canmore item SC604350) and Baines *et al.* 2003,
4 fig. 46).

5
6 eight features likewise interpreted as small pits were excavated within the area of the stone
7 spread and on its perimeter, some of which also displayed evidence of having held one or more
8 small uprights (of stone in the case of C and wood/stone D, L, M). Other features within the oval
9 defined by the stone spread took the form of stone rings (0.9–1.4 m diameter) composed of small

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

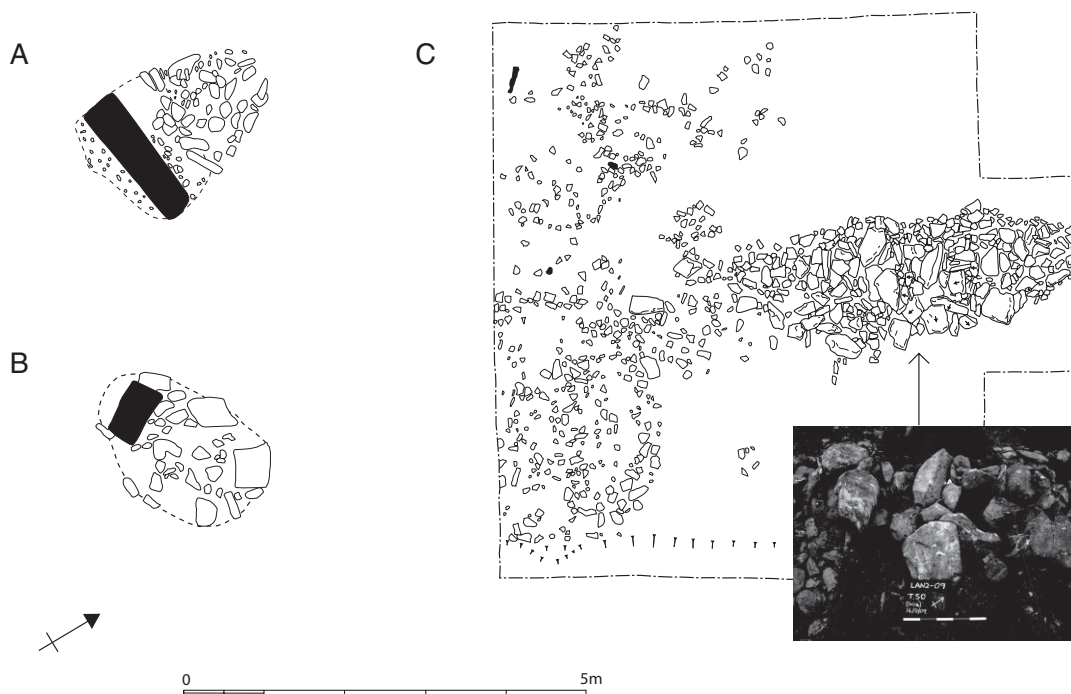


Figure 8

The 'boat-shaped' spreads (A – Miskin; B – Mynydd Llangyndeyrn 17; C – Lanacombe II (after Williams 1988; Gillings 2013)).

uprights, placed pebbles and coursed stone. The site clearly had a long and complex biography, with the oval spread seemingly the latest feature (Lewis 1966, 256–9; 1975, 19–27).

BACK TO THE STONE SETTINGS OF EXMOOR

Far from being incidental to the main structures, small uprights were being deployed in a deliberate and often sophisticated fashion; despite this, with the exception of Battle Moss, their recording has been at best superficial. The result has been a tendency to focus interpretation at the scale of the overall site plan. Take, for example, Stackpole Warren, where it was assumed by the excavators that the 2000 small stones of the main setting were originally upright. This is despite the fact that the surviving upright and leaning stones lay in parallel lines, which seems fortuitous in the extreme. An alternate reading would suggest deliberate placement (or selective lowering) of upright and recumbent miniliths to stress this linearity. However, we have no record of how the uprights were set, whether this was consistent, or whether the flat stones were accompanied by empty stoneholes. This is where recent work on Exmoor may help. Since 2007, a series of small-scale excavations have taken place on individual miniliths as part of the National Parks' ongoing monument management initiatives. Targeting stones that had suffered recent displacement or toppling, a total of six miniliths have been investigated at three settings, including three of the 13 stones that together make up the setting of Lanacombe I (Figs. 10 and

MARK GILLINGS

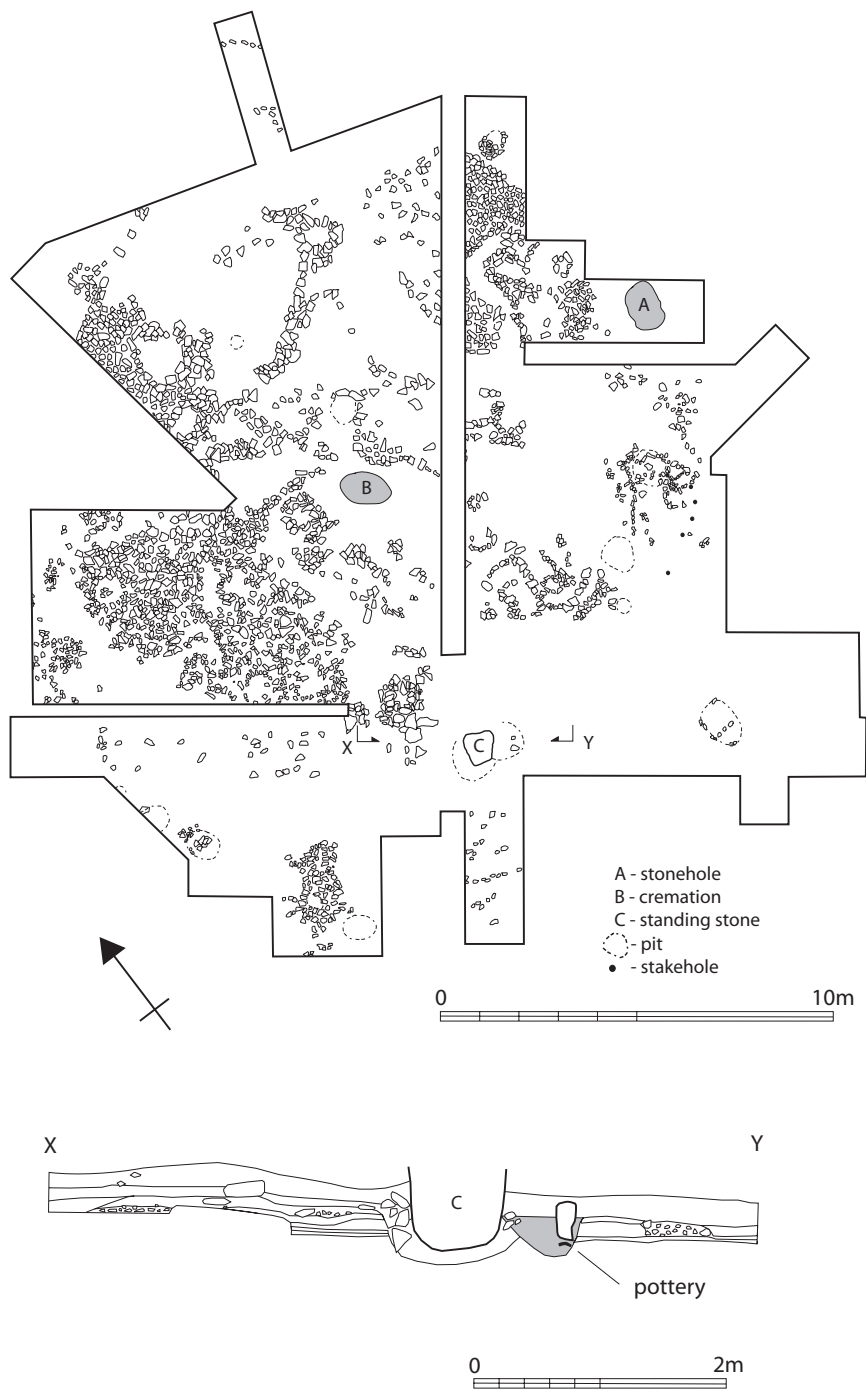


Figure 9
Rhos-y-Clegym Period II (after Lewis 1966, fig. 2; 1975, fig. 3).

1
2

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

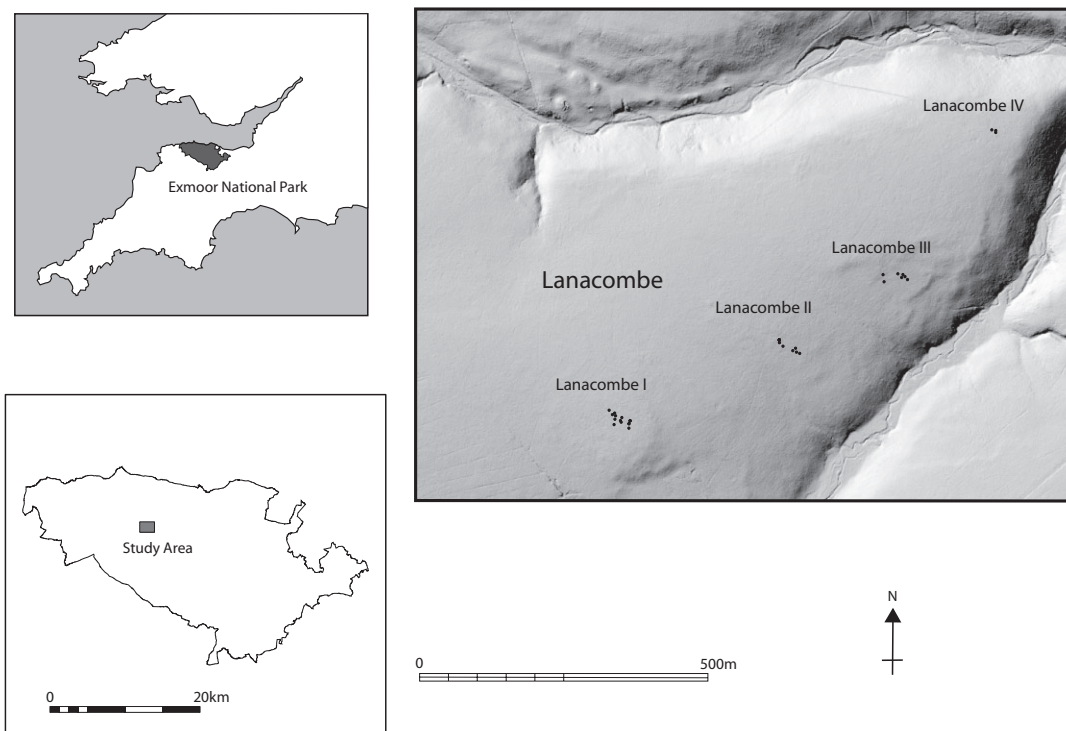


Figure 10
Location plan of the Lanacombe settings.

11). This programme of stone investigation culminated in the excavation in 2013 of a portion of the perimeter of Porlock Stone Circle encompassing three stone positions. As well as focused work on the stones, programmes of geophysical survey and excavation in the wider landscape have also been carried out to contextualize better the settings (e.g. Gillings 2013). As the detailed results of this work have been fully published, only a summary of the key findings is included below. In all cases the stones discussed are of local sandstone.

Lanacombe I

Standing to an original height of c.0.54 m, stone H of Lanacombe 1 was a sub-rectangular slab placed at one end of a carefully dug stonehole, hard against an area of outcropping natural (Fig. 12). Small flat stones had been placed on the base of the stonehole to create a level surface and had been pressed against the upright stone as part of a primary fill of clean brown soil. Pushed into this soil and in direct contact with one end of the standing stone was a single tabular piece of struck quartz. The stonehole was then levelled with a gravelly layer of weathered sandstone. Neither of these distinctive fills appears to have originated from the digging out of the original stonehole and had to have been brought to the location for this express purpose. Aligned on the upright stone and disappearing into the section to the south-west was a

MARK GILLINGS

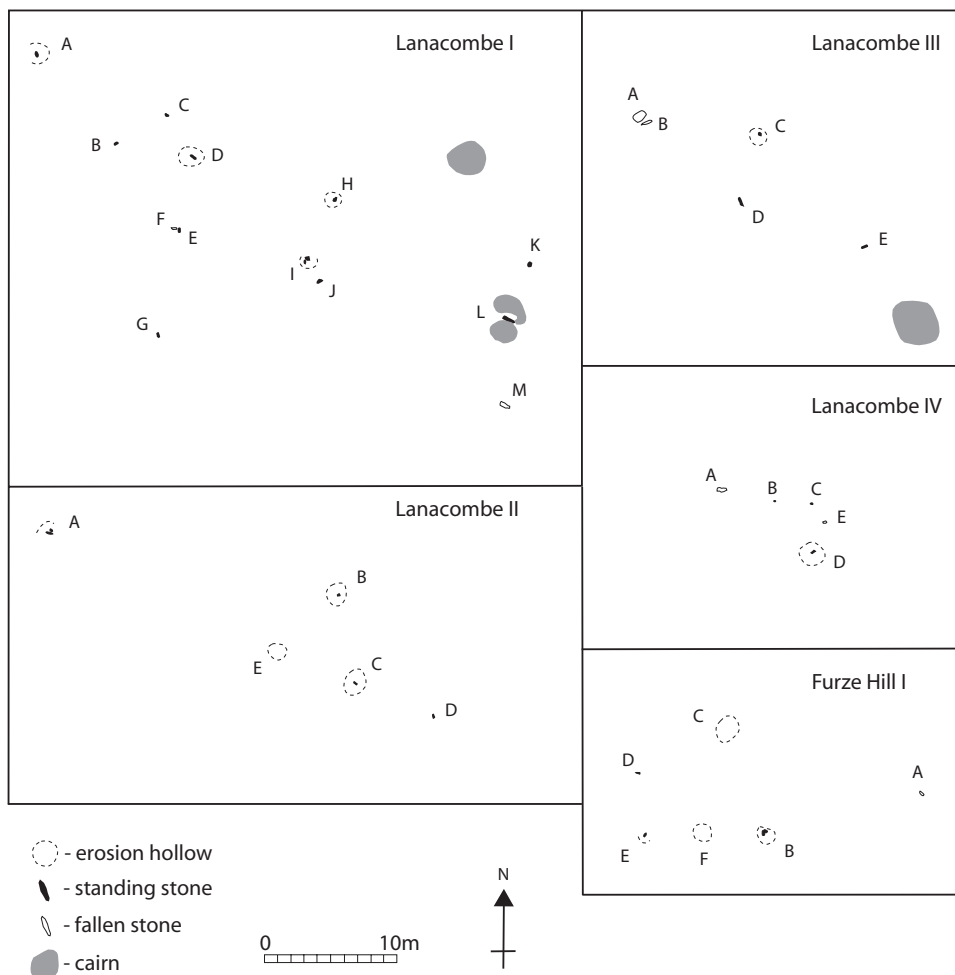


Figure 11

Plans of the settings discussed in the text (after Quinnell and Dunn 1992).

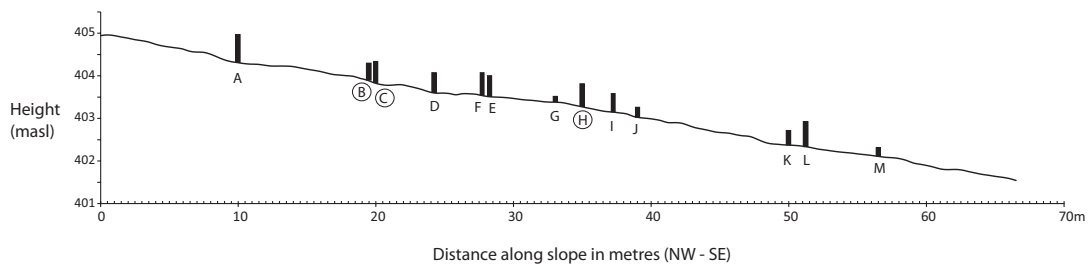


Figure 12

Schematic profile of Lanacombe I showing relative heights of uprights.

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

1 line of four larger pieces of flat sandstone (Gillings *et al.* 2010, 309–11). Originally standing to
2 a height of *c.*0.46 m, stone C was slotted into a carefully constructed box or cist of small
3 orthostats (maximum dimension 0.2 m) that had been set within a shallow hollow in the
4 underlying natural and packed into place with a deposit of silty clay. Like a tailor-made slot for
5 a rather irregular peg, the shape of the box carefully mirrored that of the base of the stone, serving
6 to fix it firmly in place (Gillings and Taylor 2011a, 27–9). The final stone investigated, stone B
7 (standing 0.32 m high), lacked any formal stonehole, being packed into place by a low cairn of
8 poorly sorted, sub-angular pieces of sandstone (0.05–0.2 m in maximum dimension). Although
9 disturbed by recent damage, there are suggestions from the published plan that this too was
10 structured around a deliberately constructed box, this time erected within the body of a low cairn.
11 As with stone H, a tabular piece of quartz had been placed at one end of the stone (*ibid.*, 25–7).

12
13 *Lanacombe II*

14 Although no standing stones were investigated, excavations carried out 20 m to the
15 south-west of the setting revealed a pair of small, aligned cairns, linked on their shared long axis
16 by a 7 m long arrangement of large, widely spaced stones. In its final phase the westernmost was
17 circular, with a rectangular cist of orthostats at its core. Of most interest is the eastern. Retaining
18 a distinctive boat shape, the core of this low cairn comprised a very irregular box of orthostats
19 against which flat slabs of sandstone had been laid, onion-skin fashion (Gillings 2013, 44–7)
20 (Fig. 8). Although not considered in the final report, this box could be interpreted as less a
21 structural consequence of the onion-skin technique used to build the cairn and instead the support
22 for a now removed standing stone; a box of the kind seen at Lanacombe I stones B and C, only
23 of an order of magnitude larger. If so, then we have a group of features close to the main cluster
24 of miniliths making up the Lanacombe II setting that echo elements discussed earlier at sites such
25 as Stackpole Warren (the stone alignment), Miskin and Mynydd Llangyndeyrn 17 (the boat-
26 shaped stone spread and standing stone).

27
28 *Lanacombe III*

29 Stone C comprised a 0.86 m long stone, square in section and tapering to a sharp spike
30 at the base. To fix it in place an oval slot had been dug and the stone rammed into it. It was then
31 packed into place with the material originally dug from the hole along with a number of pieces
32 of flat sandstone wedged against the sides of the upright to keep it in place (Gillings *et al.* 2010,
33 310–12).

34
35 *Lanacombe IV*

36 Stone D took the form of an elongated diamond standing to a height of *c.*0.8 m. An
37 over-sized stonehole had been dug and the stone placed hard against one edge (Fig. 13B). It was
38 then fixed into place with the soil that had been dug out, with no use of packing stones (Gillings
39 and Taylor 2011a, 28–32).

40
41 *Furzehill Common I*

42 Located 4 km west-north-west of Lanacombe, the stone setting Furzehill Common I was
43 first recorded in 1970 when it comprised four stones (two standing (stones E and B); two

MARK GILLINGS

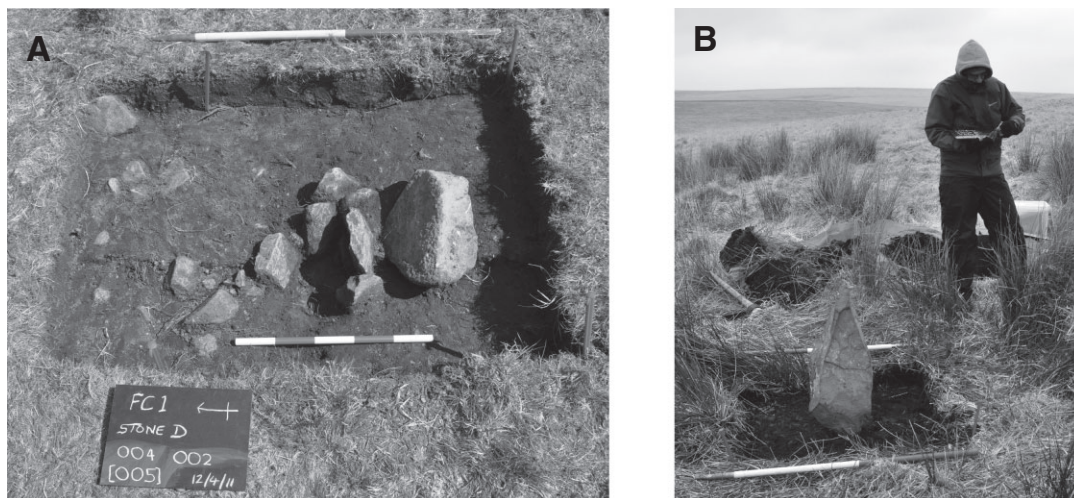


Figure 13

Furzehill Common (A) and Lanacombe IV (B), photographs by author.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28

recumbent (A and D)) and two erosion hollows (C and F) assumed to mark the positions of former uprights (Fig. 11). The status of stone D as a bona fide component of the setting was unclear, a piece of sandstone just protruding through the turf, one of many such stones noted but excluded from the formal survey (Quinnell and Dunn 1992, 24). Upon excavation, stone D proved originally to have been a 0.23 m high upright held in position by a ring of sandstone orthostats (maximum dimension 0.28 m) that had been erected in a small oval stonehole, giving the feature a cist or box-like appearance akin to Lanacombe I stone C (Fig. 13A). Lying next to the stonehole and parallel with it was the minilith which appears to have been carefully extracted, with minimum damage or disturbance to the supporting box; indeed only recent displacement caused by bracken roots prevented the upright from slipping straight back in when consolidated (Gillings and Taylor 2011b, 3–5). Dating of this removal event is uncertain though there is the suggestion that it might be very early in the life of the upright. There was certainly nothing stratigraphically to separate the stonehole and stone.

Porlock Circle

Porlock Circle currently comprises 18 stones, ranging in height from 0.07 to 0.65 m (Fig. 14). Excavation carried out in 2013 on the northern arc of the circle identified three previously unrecorded stoneholes (Features 4, 5 and 6) as well as confirming that two currently standing stones were late twentieth–early twenty-first century additions (for detail, see Gillings forthcoming). Feature 6 comprised a large, oval stonehole (0.60 x 0.50 m and reaching a depth of 0.37 m). Interestingly, the stonehole was sloping rather than vertical, the base tilting markedly to the east where the feature was undercut. The fill of the stonehole was dominated by a dense concentration of stone comprising 53 pieces of sandstone, which ranged in size from 0.04–0.16 m in maximum dimension (Fig. 15). The majority of these took the form of thin wedges that had either been specially selected or deliberately flaked. At the bottom of the stonehole were

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

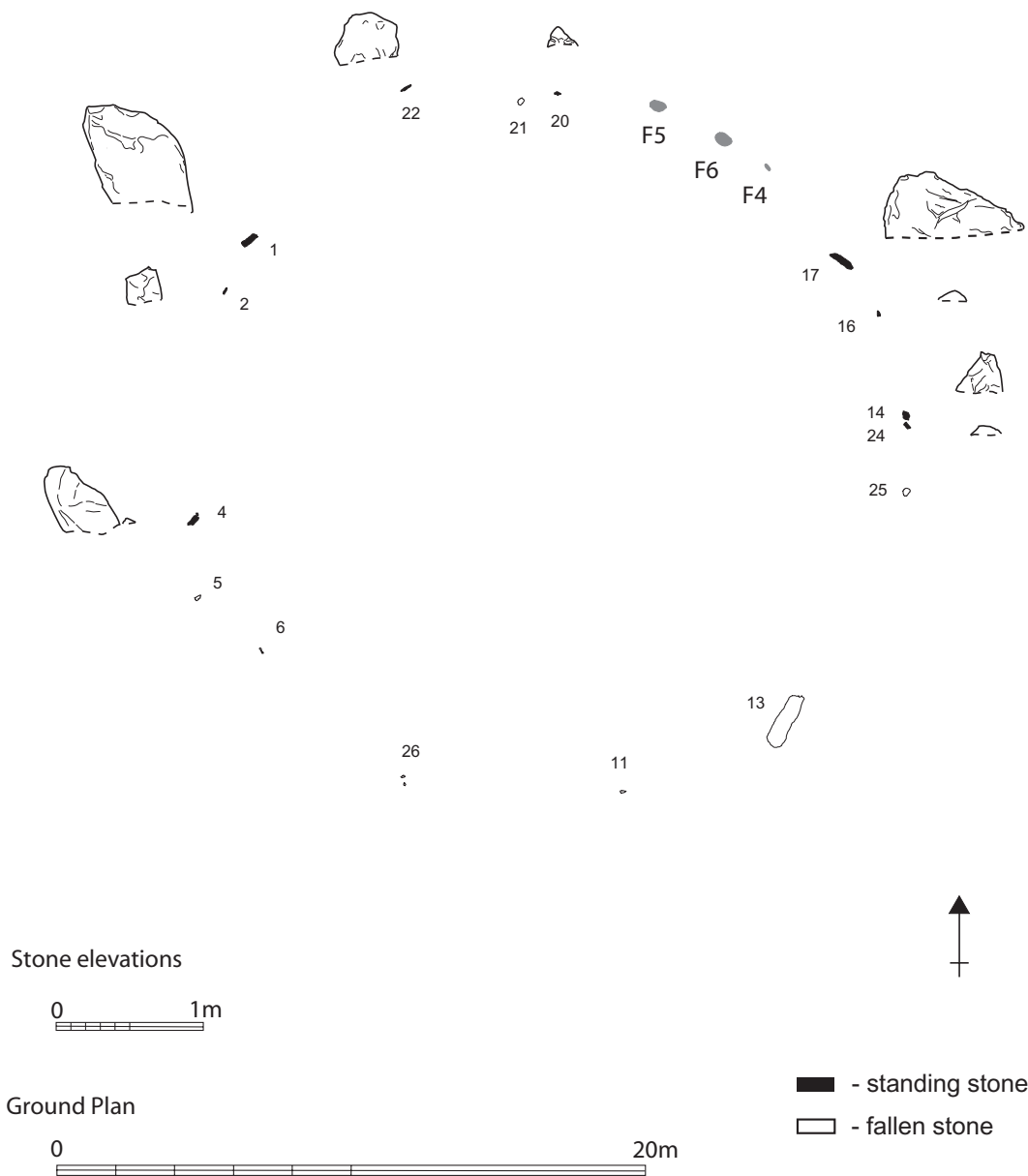


Figure 14
Plan of Porlock Circle.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7

three notably larger stones (maximum dimension 0.38 m), all of which showed evidence of flaking to accentuate their tapering form. The suggestion is of a stone that was intended from the outset to slope rather than sit upright, the difficulty of ensuring such a configuration reflected in the number of accompanying sandstone wedges. Feature 4 took the form of a deep (0.29 m)

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

1
2 Taken together, the examples discussed above demonstrate that small uprights –
3 miniliths – are far from exclusive to specific monument types such as stone rows or circles.
4 Instead, they are encountered, sometimes in remarkable numbers, on a host of different sites and
5 embody a range of practices in terms of stone selection, erection and placement, as well as
6 demonstrating complex configurative associations. As a result, it is difficult to see them as
7 entirely functional and/or in any way mundane, despite the often generalized way in which they
8 have been recorded. The challenge is how to make sense of such features.

9 One approach is to focus upon the broader trend rather than detail – in this case the
10 selection and erection of deliberately small stones as one of the simple, shared ideas drawn upon
11 by different groups in the context of a range of monumental projects. The variety of ways in
12 which such stones were deployed could then be seen as the outcome of local interpretations and
13 translations of that idea, some, such as the pairing of large and small, having wide currency,
14 others more local. In essence, the assumption is that where we see miniliths, we are essentially
15 seeing the same thing going on in different monuments. This underlies the suggestion by
16 Williams that these small stones reflect a widespread concern with miniaturization that can be
17 detected throughout the second millennium BC. To Williams, small stones were homologues,
18 direct equivalents for larger megaliths, carrying out the same role and afforded the same levels
19 of care and attention in terms of placement and erection (1988, 32–8). This would certainly
20 account for the way in which stones on Exmoor and at Battle Moss were carefully set into place,
21 and would enable us to read the deliberate pairing of stones (and perhaps the recurring iteration
22 of sizes seen in the pit at Rhos-y-Clegyrn) as a direct embodiment of this miniaturizing tendency.
23 If we accept that this shared idea (miniaturization) could be expressed in a variety of ways, then
24 the task is to identify it in practices as varied as the mid-third millennium placement of the betyl
25 stone at Avebury; the deliberate juxtaposition of small/large parallel stone rows seen at
26 Beaghmore; the placement of adjacent uprights at sites such as Rhos-y-Clegyrn; and even the
27 deployment of trigger stones on Exmoor. Indeed it may only be the tendency to treat every stone
28 found in a stonehole other than the megalith as packing that prejudices us against finding more
29 examples. Whilst Williams' work is important in drawing attention to the questions raised by
30 small standing stones, there are many issues with the notion of equivalence that lies at its heart,
31 not least the fact that it fails to address the question *why miniaturize* in the first place. Nor does
32 it explain those instances of observable patterning between large and small stones which would
33 be redundant if true equivalence pertained (e.g. the Beaghmore stone rows). Whilst some small
34 standing stones do seem to have been erected in much the same way, and in many of the same
35 contexts as traditional megaliths, many do not, even those ostensibly part of the same
36 monumental whole.

37 An alternative is to focus instead upon the detail, as has been followed here. In the case
38 of the Exmoor stone settings, the excavation of six discrete standing stones revealed at least four
39 distinctive methods for fixing small uprights in place, including stones that are part of the same
40 monument and less than 4.5 m apart. In some cases the suggestion is of performance; a
41 deliberate, drawn-out process involving the careful preparation of a stonehole or cist and
42 deliberate selection, transportation and placement of packing materials. In others, stone erection
43 seems to have been much more rapid and expedient, raising the question as to whether it was the
44 overall end product that mattered as opposed to the practices that went into its instantiation. This
45 variation in practice is striking and whilst the result – a small standing stone – was the same in

MARK GILLINGS

1 each case, the manner of effecting it was not. We see examples of careful and deliberate stone
2 setting, different only in scale from the practices observed in the case of huge megaliths at sites
3 such as Avebury, alongside practices involving the barest minimum of active intervention. We see
4 stones seemingly fixed in place and others constructed in such a way as to make removal and
5 reinsertion if not routine then at least feasible. What does this represent? Changing practices
6 through time; the preferred approach adopted by different individuals/groups; the pragmatic
7 requirements dictated by specific locations; some combination of the above or other factors
8 entirely?

9 If we accept that it took place in prehistory, the possibility of deliberate
10 decommissioning is of particular interest. The evidence from Exmoor suggests that in the case
11 of some stones this carried with it the possibility of subsequent re-erection, and we must consider
12 how many of the stones now standing spent part of their lives in abeyance. There is also a
13 tendency to see features such as stone removal and decommissioning solely through the lens of
14 clear (and discrete) phasing and modification, but perhaps this makes an originally progressive
15 and smooth process much too episodic, where small stones might have been going up and down
16 all the time with no meaningful 'break' or pause in the flow, and the final form of the settings less
17 planned than emergent, whether geometric or not (Richards and Wright 2013, 33–9). This sense
18 of a monument very much in motion (Pitts 2001, 21) might also account for the recognized lack
19 of any monumentalizing tendency on Exmoor, insofar as we do not see any evidence of a
20 continuum between small and/or simple settings and larger, more elaborate examples (Gillings
21 *et al.* 2010, 316). This perceived 'lack' may simply be a consequence of how we elect to
22 characterize the process of monumentalization in the first place. For example, the pace of
23 erection/decommissioning may have increased or decreased despite the component stones
24 staying small. All told, a very different kind of monumental practice where size and grandeur are
25 less important than frequency and dynamism. That this decommissioning of small stones was not
26 restricted to Exmoor is suggested by evidence from Leskernick, although dating is uncertain.
27 Excavations of the terminal of the stone row at the site revealed an episode of careful dismantling
28 that could conceivably have taken place in the Bronze Age, the stone removed and placed across
29 the stonehole (causing minimum damage to the latter) (Bender *et al.* 1997, 163–4; 2007, 105–8).

30 Taken as a whole, the picture revealed by excavation is one of complexity and flux.
31 Whilst a number of practices recur – carefully dug stoneholes; cist-like supportive orthostat
32 boxes; the placement of quartz at the edges of uprights; the deliberate decommissioning of
33 settings with the stone placed as if ready for reinsertion; the presence of one or more distinctive
34 wedge-shaped packing stones (termed 'triggers') that rival the size of the upright – they have yet
35 to be encountered in the same combination. Rather than a suite of simple, shared ideas being
36 expressed through a wide variety of practices, i.e. the same thing going on at superficially
37 different monuments, could the converse be true? A host of different ideas and beliefs being
38 expressed through a restricted repertoire of shared practices? Take for instance Porlock Circle
39 and in particular Feature 4. Here we have a stone that would barely have presented at the surface
40 (in common with other, unexcavated stones of the Exmoor settings, circles and stone rows) yet
41 was deliberately sunk some 0.3 m into the ground in order to effect this appearance. Put simply,
42 there was a deliberate desire to create a small surface projection with larger chunks of stone sunk
43 deeply to ensure only the very top protruded. As a practice, the latter goes beyond merely the
44 selection of small stones and might go some way towards explaining why so many of the very
45 smallest of the Exmoor stones survive. A simple functional interpretation would be that this
46 over-engineering was to ensure that otherwise very fragile, vulnerable stones stayed put, but this

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

1 ignores the fact that all of the Exmoor stones are effectively small and vulnerable yet not all
2 display this iceberg tendency. An alternative is to recognize that this is deliberate, and
3 acknowledge that stones do not always have to go up. What we could be seeing at Porlock is the
4 deliberate inversion of the upright stone ideal – in effect a stone that is ‘raised’ downwards not
5 up, the small portion projecting above the surface analogous to that usually buried beneath the
6 ground. That active concerns with reversal and inversion had broader currency during the second
7 millennium BC is strongly suggested by sites such as the Holme timber circle (Brennand *et al.*
8 2003). This opens up a very different reading of the Porlock Circle, where the surviving fabric
9 hints at alternations between stones set upright and down – in effect two circles interwoven; this
10 perhaps mediated by a third involving the larger sloping stones we now know were deliberately
11 set in angled stoneholes (Fig. 14, stones 1, 4, 17 and Feature 6). Rather than a single circular
12 motif embedding a single metaphorical meaning, we have potentially three, very different circles
13 perhaps coming together to create something far more than the sum of the individual parts; all
14 expressed through the same basic practice of stone erection. This has implications for
15 monuments such as stone rows, where the presence of very small stones is common, not least in
16 questioning archaeological approaches that privilege the visual impact (or presence) of such
17 structures as an interpretative gambit. Take, for example, work on Bodmin, where small, visually
18 unobtrusive stones making up stone rows were ‘invigorated’ by marking each with a prominent
19 red flag or wrapping them in white plastic (Bender *et al.* 2007, 100, pls. C2(b), C4(c)). It also
20 draws attention to the setting of miniliths upright in pits (as at Rhos-y-Clegyrn) as well as
21 situations in more traditional megalithic monuments where stoneholes seem unnecessarily deep
22 (e.g. Richards and Wright 2013, 41). It certainly suggests that, contra Clare, we do need to pay
23 careful attention to megaliths that ‘barely protrude above the grass’. How many of our stumps
24 may in fact be the ‘bases’ of inverted megaliths? A different reading also presents itself for
25 instances of precisely the opposite, where conspicuously large megaliths are encountered which
26 sit in extremely shallow stoneholes (Downes *et al.* 2013, 103–4; Smith 1965, pl. XLb).

27 Where researchers have identified strong topographic and lunar significance in the
28 organization of monumental structures in other parts of the country (e.g. Bradley 2005), the
29 results from Porlock suggest that a strong chthonic element may also have been in play in the
30 south-west if not more broadly, and as well as looking up (to the heavens) and across (to the
31 surrounding landscape) we also need to consider looking down.

32
33 CONCLUSIONS

34 As noted in the introduction, throughout Britain and Ireland, the late third and second
35 millennia BC were characterized by the appearance of a diverse range of stone monuments whose
36 complex biographies and associations render straightforward classification difficult (Roberts
37 2013, 535–6). In upland areas, these frequently incorporated standing stones – paired, alone, in
38 rows, circles and other geometric configurations (not to mention more erratic arrangements) – in
39 complex relationships with other earthen, wood and stone elements as well as natural features
40 (Bradley 2007, 173–5). One recurrent element of these monumental projects that has escaped
41 sustained critical attention has been the frequent presence of very small upright stones. The current
42 discussion has sought to draw attention to the way in which such features have been effectively
43 written out of our narratives, arguing that far from being mundane or secondary, miniliths represent
44 a further example of the kind of shared belief or idea posited by Bradley and Williams and as a
45 result deserve our critical attention. As the selective review has demonstrated, miniliths occur on

MARK GILLINGS

1 a wide variety of sites spread across the British Isles and whilst several recurring tropes can be
2 identified, they embody considerable variety and variation. In the majority of cases, the cursory
3 way in which such elements have been recorded limits interpretation to questions of pattern,
4 carried out at the scale of the overall monument plan. That further information can be teased out
5 has been demonstrated by the results of recent fieldwork on Exmoor, which argue strongly that
6 identifying small standing stones as a tangible reflection of a widely shared set of beliefs or ideas
7 is merely the first step. For example, the results from the stone settings reveal that surface
8 appearances can be deceptive, a group of otherwise identical standing stones raised and fixed in
9 place using a range of very different practices and techniques. This implies that there may be a
10 further stratum of ideas, materials and practices in play, working at a much finer grain than is
11 usually considered. Similarly, at Porlock Circle the converse seems to be true, where a single set
12 of consistent practices for the raising of stones seems to have been employed to express different,
13 potentially oppositional beliefs. The suggestion here is that rather than a straightforward material
14 manifestation of a simple underlying belief or principle, we are seeing instead a complex interplay
15 and flow between the underlying concepts being expressed and the pool of materials and practices
16 through which this was realized, with the potential for both beliefs and practices to be transformed
17 in the process. Take, for example, the principle of megalithic inversion identified at Porlock Circle
18 that may well have much wider interpretative value.

19 There are undoubtedly limitations with both the data presented, the theoretical
20 frameworks used to explore them and arguments developed as a result. In the case of Exmoor, the
21 results derive from a piecemeal programme of excavation shaped by management concerns. As a
22 result, with the exception of the decommissioned examples stumbled upon by accident, this has
23 taken the form of very small trenches placed over badly disturbed stones. These tend to be the
24 larger examples and in the majority of cases considerable damage had taken place to the original
25 stoneholes and associated deposits prior to excavation. No stone settings have been fully
26 investigated and the current lack of dating evidence is problematic, not least in establishing the
27 chronology for activities such as stone decommissioning and the tempo of the placement of
28 individual standing stones. Looking to the underlying theoretical frameworks, whilst the work of
29 researchers such as Bradley and Richards has certainly focused attention upon the ways in which
30 different ideas may have been creatively worked through using distinctive materials and practices
31 (as well as situations where the same idea may have been expressed through superficially very
32 different media such as wood, stone, cloth or pigment), there is the nagging worry that the ideas
33 being drawn upon may have been far from 'simple' and anything but stable. There is also a
34 potential danger that rather than seeking to identify specific classes of monument, we will instead
35 distil them down into a series of ideas or motifs and begin to classify those instead. Needless to say,
36 any such tendency needs to be resisted.

37 Despite these caveats, the discussion has highlighted the enormous interpretative
38 potential presented by small standing stones. To realize these opportunities more fully we need
39 to refine our current approaches to both recording and interpretation. This is not to advocate a
40 form of hyper-empiricism when it comes to the presence of stones or to claim that all stones were
41 equally significant, it is merely to note that our current approaches may have set the bar a little
42 too high.

43 *Acknowledgements*

44
45 Thanks to the Exmoor National Park Authority for their support, and Jeremy Taylor for his
46 invaluable feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

BETYLMANIA? – SMALL STANDING STONES AND THE MEGALITHS OF SOUTH-WEST BRITAIN

School of Archaeology and Ancient History
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
E-mail: mg41@leicester.ac.uk

REFERENCES

- BAINES, A., BROPHY, K. and PANNETT, A. 2003: Yarrow Landscape Project/Battle Moss stone rows. *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* 4, 94–5.
- BENDER, B., HAMILTON, S. and TILLEY, C. 1997: Leskernick: stone worlds; alternative narratives; nested landscapes. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 63, 147–78.
- BENDER, B., HAMILTON, S. and TILLEY, C. 2007: *Stone Worlds: Narrative and Reflexivity in Landscape Archaeology* (Walnut Creek).
- BENSON, D.G., EVANS, J.G., WILLIAMS, G.H., DARVILL, T. and DAVID, A. 1990: Excavations at Stackpole Warren, Dyfed. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 56, 179–245.
- BRADLEY, R. 2005: *The Moon and the Bonfire: An Investigation of Three Stone Circles in North East Scotland* (Edinburgh).
- BRADLEY, R. 2007: *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge).
- BRADLEY, R. 2011: *Stages and Screens: An Investigation of Four Henge Monuments in Northern and North-Eastern Scotland* (Edinburgh).
- BRENNAND, M., TAYLOR, M., ASHWIN, T., BAYLISS, A., CANTI, M., CHAMBERLAIN, A., FRENCH, C., FRYER, V., GALE, R., GREEN, F., GROVES, C., HALL, A., LINFORD, N., MURPHY, P., ROBINSON, M., WELLS, J. and WILLIAMS, D. 2003: The survey and excavation of a Bronze Age timber circle at Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, 1998–9. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 69, 1–84.
- BURL, A. 1976: *The Stone Circles of the British Isles* (New Haven).
- BURL, A. 1993: *From Carnac to Callanish: The Prehistoric Stone Rows and Avenues of Britain, Ireland and Brittany* (New Haven).
- CAITHNESS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST 2004: Battle Moss (http://www.caithnessarchaeology.org.uk/battle_moss.html). Accessed 12 February, 2014.
- CHANTER, J.F. and WORTH, R.H. 1905: The rude stone monuments of Exmoor and its borders. *Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 37, 375–97.
- CHANTER, J.F. and WORTH, R.H. 1906: The rude stone monuments of Exmoor and its borders, Part II. *Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 38, 538–52.
- CLARE, T. 2010: Megalith size and the implications for our understanding of contemporary society, with particular reference to Cumbria, north-west England. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 29(3), 245–52.
- COONEY, G. 2010: Mundane stone and its meaning in the Neolithic. In O'CONNOR, B., COONEY, G. and CHAPMAN, J. (eds.), *Materialitas: Working Stone, Carving Identity* (Oxford), 64–74.
- DOWNES, J., RICHARDS, C., BROWN, J., CRESSWELL, A., ELLEN, R., DAVIES, A., HALL, A., MCCULLOCH, R., SANDERSON, D. and SIMPSON, I. 2013: Investigating the Great Ring of Brodgar, Orkney. In RICHARDS, C. (ed.), *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North* (Oxford), 90–118.
- EMMETT, D.D. 1979: Stone rows: the traditional view reconsidered. *Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings* 37, 94–114.
- ENGLISH HERITAGE 2007: *Pastscape* (http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=433037). Accessed 12 February, 2014.
- FOLEY, C. and MACDONAGH, M. 1998: Copney Stone Circles: a County Tyrone enigma. *Archaeology Ireland* 12(1), 24–8.
- GILLINGS, M. 2013: Excavation of the prehistoric landscapes of Lanacombe, Exmoor. *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* 156, 41–73.
- GILLINGS, M. forthcoming: Excavation and survey at Porlock Stone Circle, Exmoor. *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*.
- GILLINGS, M. and TAYLOR, J. 2011a: Excavation and survey at the Exmoor stone settings of Lanacombe I and IV. *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* 154, 23–34.

MARK GILLINGS

- 1 GILLINGS, M. and TAYLOR, J. 2011b: Geophysical survey and excavation at the Exmoor stone setting of
2 Furzehill Common. *Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings* 69, 1–8.
- 3 GILLINGS, M., POLLARD, J., WHEATLEY, D.W. and PETERSON, R. 2008: *Landscape of the Megaliths:
4 Excavation and Fieldwork on the Avebury Monuments 1997–2003* (Oxford).
- 5 GILLINGS, M., POLLARD, J. and TAYLOR, J. 2010: The miniliths of Exmoor. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric
6 Society* 76, 297–318.
- 7 GRINSELL, L.V. 1970: *The Archaeology of Exmoor* (Newton Abbot).
- 8 HERRING, P. 2008: Stepping out onto the commons: south-western stone rows. In RAINBIRD, P. (ed.),
9 *Monuments in the Landscape* (Stroud), 79–88.
- 10 JOHNSON, N. and ROSE, P. 1994: *Bodmin Moor: An Archaeological Survey. Vol. 1: The Human Landscape
11 to c.1800* (Swindon).
- 12 LEWIS, J.M. 1966: The excavation of four standing-stones in south Wales. *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic
13 Studies* XXI, 250–64.
- 14 LEWIS, J.M. 1975: Excavations at Rhos-y-Clegyrn prehistoric site, St. Nicholas, Pembs. *Archaeologia
15 Cambriensis* 123, 13–42.
- 16 LUCAS, G. 2012: *Understanding the Archaeological Record* (Cambridge).
- 17 MAY, A. MCL. and MITCHELL, G.F. 1953: Neolithic habitation site, stone circles and alignments at
18 Beaghmore, Co. Tyrone. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 83(2), 174–97.
- 19 PITTS, M. 2001: Excavating the Sanctuary: new investigations on Overton Hill, Avebury. *Wiltshire
20 Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 94, 1–23.
- 21 QUINNELL, N.V. and DUNN, C.J. 1992: *Lithic Monuments within the Exmoor National Park: A New Survey
22 for Management Purposes* (Unpublished RCHME survey report).
- 23 RICHARDS, C. 2013: Interpreting stone circles. In RICHARDS, C. (ed.), *Building the Great Stone Circles of the
24 North* (Oxford), 2–30.
- 25 RICHARDS, C. and WRIGHT, J. 2013: Monuments in the making: the stone circles of western Scotland. In
26 RICHARDS, C. (ed.), *Building the Great Stone Circles of the North* (Oxford), 31–61.
- 27 RILEY, H. and WILSON-NORTH, R. 2001: *The Field Archaeology of Exmoor* (Swindon).
- 28 ROBERTS, B.W. 2013: Britain and Ireland in the Bronze Age: farmers in the landscape or heroes on the high
29 seas? In FOKKENS, H. and HARDING, A. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the European Bronze Age*
30 (Oxford), 531–49.
- 31 SMITH, I. 1965: *Windmill Hill and Avebury* (Oxford).
- 32 THOM, A.S. 1980: The stone rings of Beaghmore: geometry and astronomy. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*
33 43, 15–19.
- 34 TILLEY, C. 2010: *Interpreting Landscapes: Geologies, Topographies, Identities* (Walnut Creek).
- 35 VYNER, B.E. 1977: The excavation of a standing stone at Miskin, Llantrisant, Glamorgan. *Archaeologia
36 Cambriensis* 126, 17–23.
- 37 WARD, A.H. 1983: Excavations around two standing stones on Mynydd Llangyndeyrn, Dyfed. *Archaeologia
38 Cambriensis* 132, 30–48.
- 39 WILLIAMS, G. 1988: *The Standing Stones of Wales and South-West England* (Oxford, BAR Brit. Ser. 197).

AUTHOR QUERY FORM

Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for publication, the questions listed below have arisen.

Please attend to these matters and return this form with your proof.

Many thanks for your assistance.

Query References	Query	Remarks
1	AUTHOR: Please confirm that given names (red) and surnames/family names (green) have been identified correctly.	
2	*AUTHOR: Dryden, H. and Shearer, R.T. 1871 has not been included in the Reference List, please supply full publication details.	

Note: The query which is preceded by * is added by Toppan Best-set.