

Pulling back the covers on sleeping stones: recent excavations on the Beckhampton Avenue, Avebury

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The photograph on the front cover of this volume of *Lithics* shows an excavated stone belonging to the Beckhampton Avenue, north Wiltshire. This late Neolithic processional avenue of paired standing stones ran from the western entrance of the Avebury henge monument for a length of at least 1.5km. First recorded by the early 18th century antiquarian William Stukeley, it has suffered greatly from the destructive regimes of Medieval zealots and early Post-Medieval farmers, and all that remains visible today are two massive megaliths (the 'Longstones') standing serenely in a field 1km from Avebury. Since the days of Stukeley doubts began to emerge as to whether or not this avenue really existed. These doubts were put to rest as a result of excavations carried out by a team from the Universities of Leicester, Newport and Southampton in August-September 1999 (Gillings *et al.* 2000). During the course of that work, a Neolithic ditched enclosure was investigated along with several stone-holes and stone destruction features belonging to the Beckhampton Avenue.

The avenue was constructed from locally occurring blocks of sarsen – a very resilient sandstone. Although many of the stones here, within Avebury and along the West Kennet Avenue (leading from the southern entrance of the henge), were broken up to provide building material during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, others survived destruction through burial during the Medieval period (Smith 1965, 176-181). Such burial may have taken place at the instigation of the church, eager to quell superstitious beliefs and pagan practices that may have become associated with the stones (Joep 1999, 67).

At Beckhampton, three buried sarsens were revealed, ranging in size from 2.5 to 3.0m. Although unmodified blocks, we believe that shape, size and the presence of featured surfaces were important in the choice of stone for the avenue builders. A particularly 'featured' block contained several natural perforations (Figure 1), into one of which a seemingly deliberate collection of objects – worked flints and split cattle bone – had been placed. Its 'pair' was of particular interest in that distinct areas of smoothing and grinding were visible on one surface (Fig. 2). These resulted from the utilisation of the block, prior

to erection, for grinding and polishing stone axes. The use of sarsens as *polissoirs* can be paralleled locally with some of the stones within Avebury, along the West Kennet Avenue (Smith 1965, 223), and at the early Neolithic West Kennet long barrow (Piggott 1962, 19). In the case of the Beckhampton and Avebury stones, these polishing 'events' may already have been of great antiquity by the time the stones were chosen and set-up. They highlight something of the 'biography' of stone. Far from being mute building materials we like to think of these sarsens as artefacts embodying complex life histories (Gillings & Pollard 1999), histories which began, and were perhaps well known, even before the stones were dragged from their original locations in the 'sarsen fields' of the Upper Kennet Valley and set-up to form the avenue. Their burial in carefully dug pits during the Middle Ages, and subsequent uncovering through our excavation, are as much part of their life-stories as their appropriation for the avenue in the late Neolithic. Not wishing to deny them this part of their history (and wishing to stay on the right side of the farmer) these newly discovered avenue stones have been left to slumber in their burial pits.

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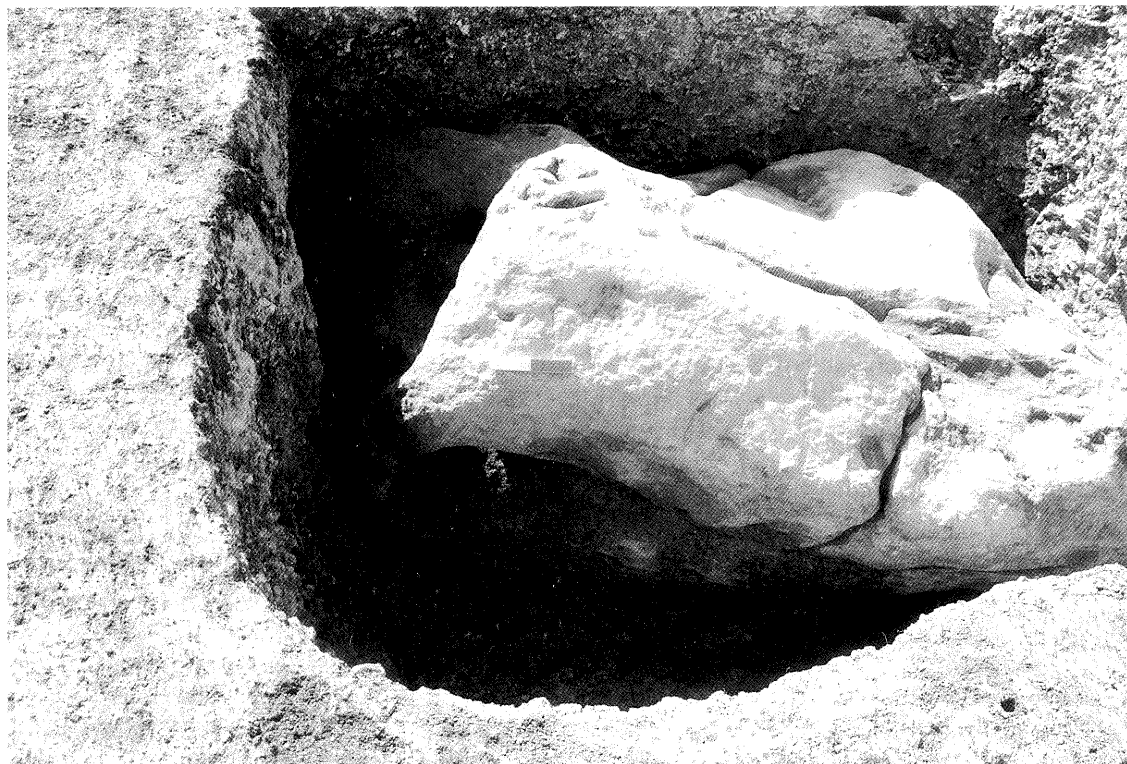


Fig. 1. Detail of the sarsen in burial pit F.26, showing the deeply featured surface and natural perforations.

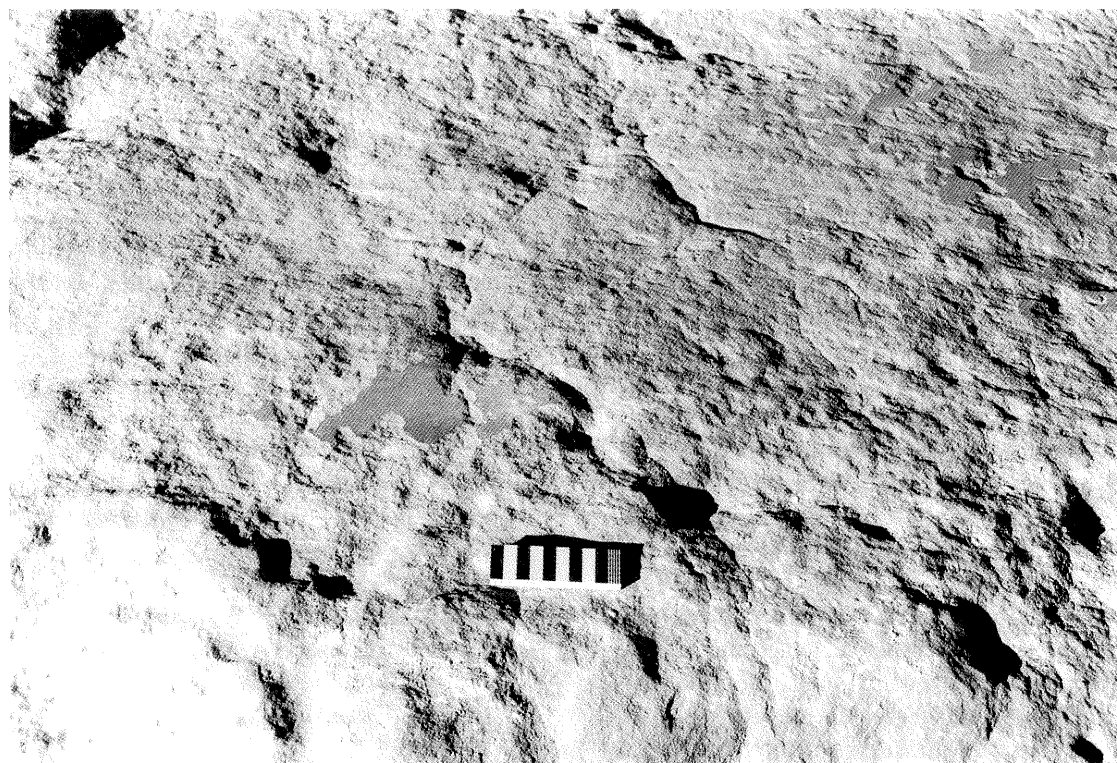


Fig. 2. Axe polishing marks on the surface of the sarsen in burial pit F.25.