

# The Durrington Walls Sarsen Burial relocated and reconsidered

by *Richard Higham and Chris Carey*

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*In 1809 Richard Colt Hoare was alerted to the discovery of a burial at Durrington Walls. The burial contained an important set of grave goods, which were subsequently included in his famous publication *Ancient Wiltshire* and are now on display within Devizes Museum. Although Colt Hoare recovered artefacts from the burial, the location of the grave was only vaguely described in *Ancient Wiltshire*, with the burial recorded as being capped by a sarsen stone. This Sarsen Burial is reconsidered in this contribution, with its probable location defined through identification of sarsen stones on early OS maps. The artefact grouping indicates a burial date between 2250–1950BC, a time when Beaker burials dominate the archaeological record. We consider the importance of the burial, under a sarsen stone, with an important grave assemblage which lacks a Beaker vessel, in context of the Beaker period and the Durrington Walls henge.*

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## Introduction

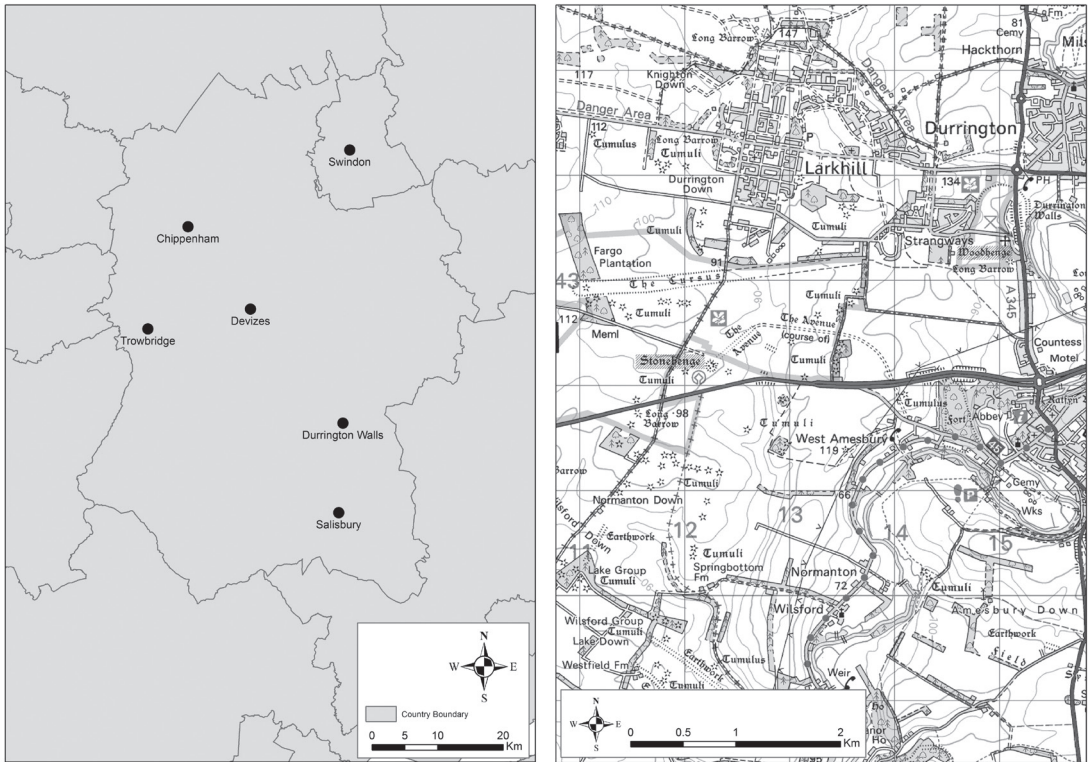
Sir Richard Colt Hoare and William Cunnington stand as pioneers and innovators in the antiquarian movement (Marsden 1999, 39), in attempting to understand the ‘ancient Britons’, through the excavation of tumuli (barrows) across Wiltshire. This contribution reconsiders one of their many important discoveries, the Sarsen Burial at Durrington Walls, which was published in *Ancient Wiltshire* (Colt Hoare 1812), in light of changing ideas about, and chronologies of, the Beaker period in Wessex.

During 1809 a significant burial was ‘excavated’ at the site of Durrington Walls (Figure 1) by a shepherd. Colt Hoare, alerted to the discovery, visited the shepherd and rescued the artefacts (letters from *Ancient Wiltshire* BOX MS 932596), although the exact location of this burial has remained uncertain since its excavation. Through a simple map regression, we have located its probable position with a degree of confidence, allowing it to be viewed within its landscape context. However, it is necessary to start with *Ancient Wiltshire* to see the context of

the burial’s discovery and its significance, which was so clearly evident to Sir Richard Colt Hoare and William Cunnington more than two hundred years before our present understanding.

## The discovery of the Sarsen Burial

The Durrington Walls Sarsen Burial grave was discovered in 1809 by a shepherd who found his bar stuck in the ground when pitching a sheep fold. Further investigation by the shepherd revealed a large sarsen stone, with a burial underneath. The discovery of this burial was brought to the attention of the eminent antiquarian Sir Richard Colt Hoare, who writes of the discovery of the grave to his fellow archaeologist, William Cunnington in May 1809 (letters from *Ancient Wiltshire* BOX MS 932596; Devizes Museum): ‘We heard of a singular discovery made on Durrington field by a shepherd who in pitching his fold on the field a little to the west of



*Fig. 1 The location of Durrington Walls*

the British village called Durrington Walls, found his crow bar impeded by some hard substance. He found the impediment arising from a large sarsen stone. His curiosity prompted him to make to further researches and under the stone he found the skeleton of a Britain with his head laid towards the north and interred with him by his side were the following articles- viz- a spear head of flint, a whetstone, a pully ornament of jet, a button ditto, and some little pieces of bone or white stone the size of farthings.'

The significance and antiquity of the grave were immediately recognised by Colt Hoare and Cunnington, who by 1809 had extensive experience of digging barrows, and the artefacts and burials they contained, within the Wiltshire landscape. Colt Hoare describes the burial and the grave good as 'all bespeaking of an interment of the earliest date' (Colt Hoare 1812, 172). The manner of the interment was also recognised as significant as the burial was not within a barrow. Colt Hoare writes to William Cunnington to describe the implications of this mode of burial (letters from Ancient Wiltshire BOX MS 932596; Devizes Museum): 'This is another proof that the Britons had other modes of

interment but under barrows, nor could the barrows, however numerous in their parts suffice for the great population which we had good reason to imagine once existed on these deserted downs.' For Colt Hoare this burial provided an answer as to where other ancient Britons in Wiltshire were buried, once it was recognised that the barrows could only contain a fraction of the ancient population. Cunnington replying (letters from Ancient Wiltshire BOX MS 932596; Devizes Museum) cites the area around Avebury (Avebury) where, he declares, 'Many of the interments are covered with the above stones [Sarsen stones] and tumuli raised over them. I conceive in the first place there was a tumulus existed here but was afterwards levelled for the plough.'

Cunnington shrewdly connects burials of what we now understand to be the Beaker period with the sarsen stone, an association borne out by more recent excavation at, for example, the West Kennet Avenue, Avebury (Smith 1965; Carey and Higham forthcoming). Cunnington's conception of the grave being under a ploughed-out tumulus seems unlikely, now its position has been re-discovered (below). Colt Hoare seems to disagree with Cunnington,

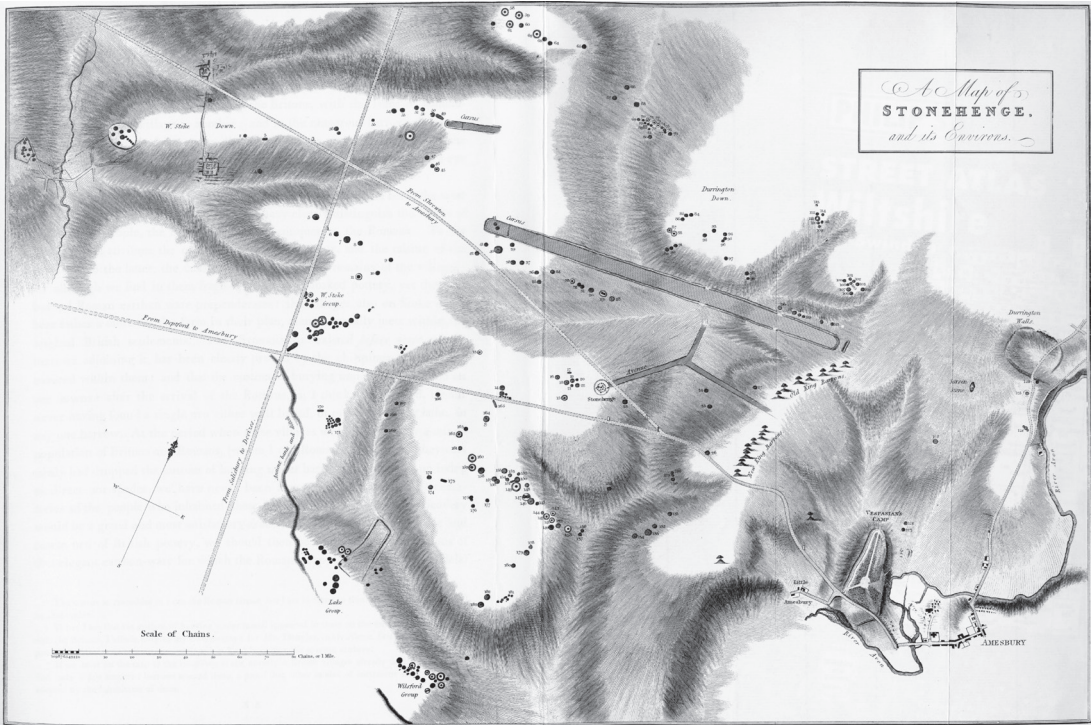


Fig. 2 The original engraving of the Stonehenge landscape, published in *Ancient Wiltshire* (1812), drawn by Phillip Crocker

theorising in *Ancient Wiltshire* (1812, 172) about flat graves for interments in prehistory, something now well-established feature for the Beaker period, e.g. in the cases of those burials on the West Kennet Avenue, of the Amesbury Archer (Fitzpatrick 2013), and probably Racton man (Needham *et al.* 2017).

## Durrington Walls and the location of the Sarsen Burial

Durrington Walls is a large oval henge, classified as a type 2 henge (Piggott 1939), with an internal irregular ditch and external bank, and with two entrances known, to the east and to the west (Wainwright and Longworth 1971, 1), although Parker Pearson *et al.* (2007) suggest four entrances. The henge is large with Wainwright and Longworth (*ibid.*) giving its diameters as 487m NW–SE axis and 472m NE–SW. The henge slopes in a general west to east direction heading towards the river Avon, which is joined to the henge by a recently discovered avenue (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2006). Woodhenge is located approximately 60m to the south and was

excavated by Maud and Ben Cunnington 1926–8 (Cunnington 1929).

As the exact location of the Durrington grave is not recorded in Colt Hoare's writings, it had been lost to present-day archaeologists. By examining OS maps, we have located the burial to a high degree of probability. The first key piece of evidence comes from Colt Hoare (1812, 172) who says the burial was a little to the west of Durrington Walls. Its location was not recorded on the map of the Stonehenge area drawn by Phillip Crocker (Figures 2 and 3; Colt Hoare 1812, 172–3). His engraving indicates that the sarsen stone was neither set upright nor visible at the time, as the only upstanding sarsen stone in this area is the Cuckoo Stone, which is on the engraving. An early OS map of 1887 does show a sarsen stone northwest of Durrington Walls, a location consistent with the one Colt Hoare describes (1812, 172) (Figure 4). This is interpreted as being the most likely location of the Sarsen Burial. This sarsen stone is not recorded on the 1926 OS map, which shows development west of Durrington Walls and it is possible the sarsen stone was moved as part of this development. This 1926 map instead shows a sarsen stone within the hedge line northwest of

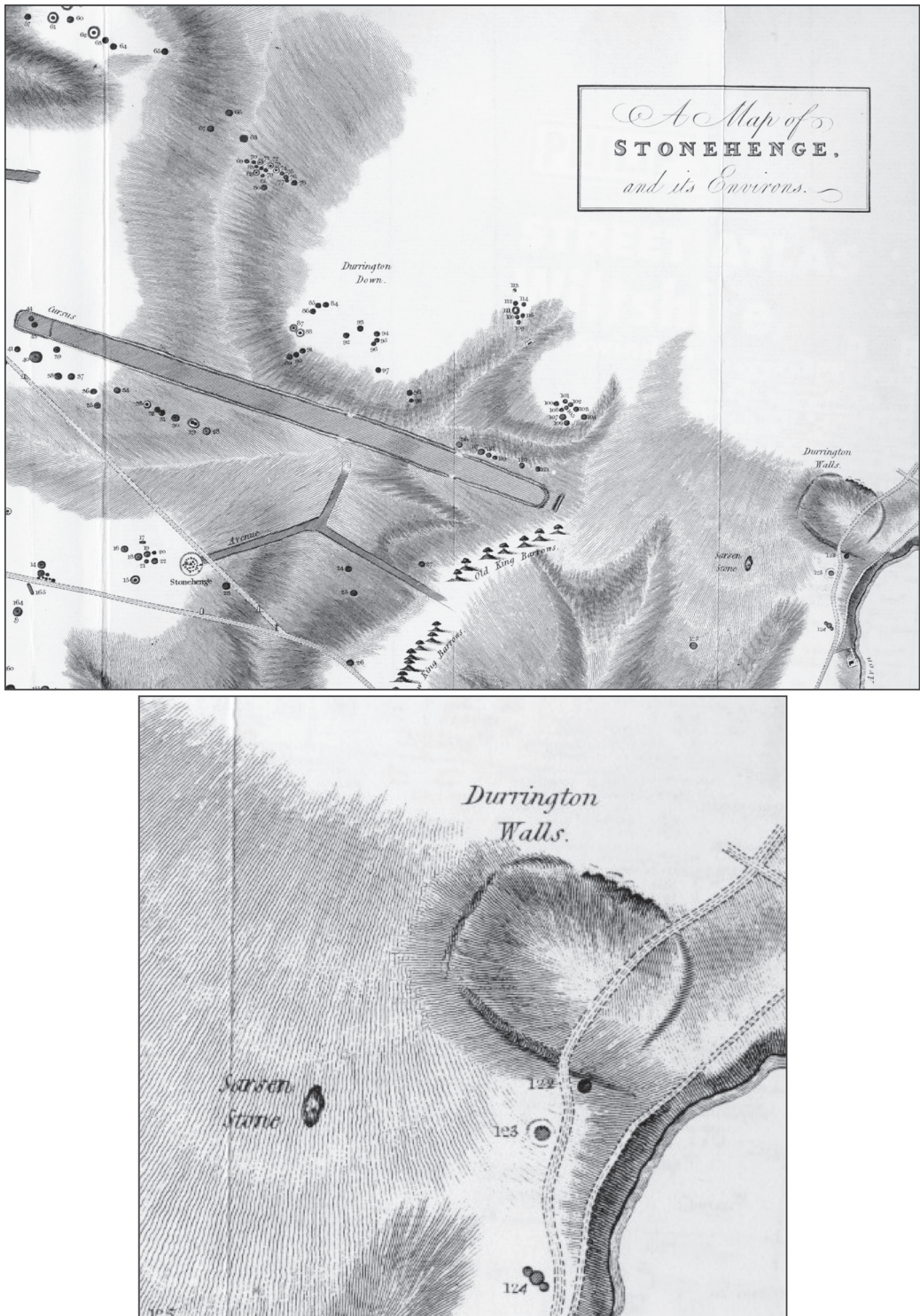


Fig. 3 The Durrington Walls area of the Stonehenge landscape engraving by Phillip Crocker. The bottom image clearly shows the sarsen stone (Cuckoo Stone) marked as the only standing stone close to Durrington Walls

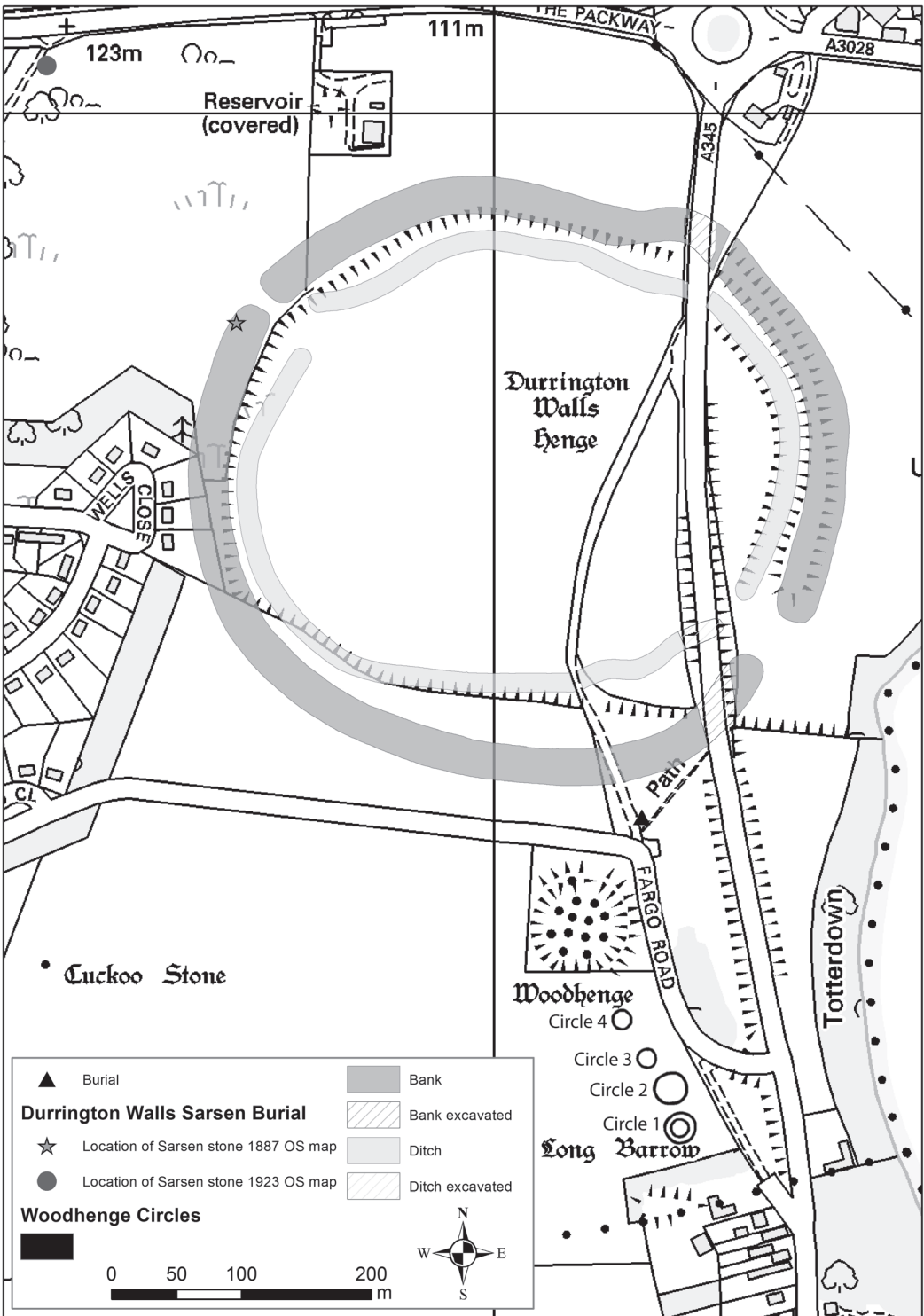


Fig. 4 The Durrington Walls henge and excavated burials, showing the georeferenced location of the Sarsen Burial derived from the 1887 OS map, and the position of the sarsen stone recorded in the 1926 OS map

Durrington Walls. It would appear the sarsen had been dragged to the edge of the field after 1887.

This simple map regression does show that a sarsen stone present before 1887 had been moved by 1926, probably to the hedge line. The georeferenced position of the sarsen stone recorded on the 1887 map is NGR: 418801, 143838. Farrer (1918, 101–2) appears to describe the sarsen stone once it had been moved to the edge of the field: ‘I also found four fragments of ware of the same period close to, and apparently dug by a rabbit from underneath the sarsen that lies 350yards from the earthwork. Presumably this is the stone mentioned by Colt Hoare in *Ancient Wiltshire*, but he use the vague phrase ‘above Durrington Walls’. Farrer goes on: ‘It has been suggested that this was a stone intended for Stonehenge, a ridiculous idea, for who would bring a stone about 6 feet x 5 feet x 3 feet 6 inches, weighing at least 5 tons, to within two miles of their destination and leave it?’ Given that very few sarsen stones have been recorded in the vicinity of Durrington Walls, it would seem likely that this is the stone from the Sarsen Burial, although, of course, this is an interpretation. However, this reference does provide the only description of a sarsen stone immediately north of Durrington Walls including its dimensions.

The Sarsen Burial is, of course, not the only burial in the area surrounding Durrington Walls. A number of burials are either certainly dateable to this time period by their association with Beaker pottery or likely to date to it, but are undated as they are not associated with grave goods (Figure 4). Whilst no burials have yet been found within the henge, it is common for burials in the Beaker period to reference earlier monuments such as henges, although this practice changes over time (Bowden *et al.* 2017 47–53; and see below).

Of significance is a Beaker burial described as 60ft to the outside the southern bank of Durrington Walls, contained within a small barrow ditch, 37ft in diameter and roughly dug and angular in shape (Stone, Piggott and Booth 1954; black triangle on figure 4). The ditch contained occupation refuse, animal bones and 3 large horn cores, a quantity of secondary Neolithic sherds, one scraper, a few pieces of sandstone rubbers and much burnt soil and flint. The central grave was a shallow and contained a small contracted skeleton with a large Beaker. This Beaker vessel is described as roughly made, asymmetric and unornamented. This burial is certainly intriguing, with an unornamented asymmetric Beaker, buried close to Durrington

Walls, but outside the monument, raising parallels to the Sarsen Burial above, in terms of location relative to the henge. A further reference to a burial within Durrington Walls is also made by Farrer, (1918) who describes: ‘Mr Beswick telephoned to say that in digging a trench, a skeleton had been found but the workman, thinking the skull was a basin, put his pick through it.’ This trench was recorded as being dug for ‘camp drainage’ and is presumably the trench dug in 1917, marked as section C-D on his plan, located on the west side of the Durrington Walls henge, on the scarp between the bank and ditch. This burial, whilst undated, is on the same side of the monument as the Sarsen Burial, although no other details are recorded.

A number of further Beaker period burials were also excavated and recorded by Maud and Ben Cunnington as part of the Woodhenge excavations (Cunnington 1929). These include Woodhenge circle 1, a grave surrounded by two concentric ditches within a ploughed out barrow. The inhumation was accompanied by a Long Necked Beaker and a battle axe made from Lands End Tourmaline. Woodhenge circle 2 was another ploughed out barrow with a surviving ditch which contained seven pits. One of these pits contained an unaccompanied inhumation and another a cremation associated with 3 small shards of Grooved Ware pottery. Within Woodhenge two further inhumations were found. The body of a probable teenager had been inserted into the eastern section of ditch opposite the entrance and the burial of a small child was also excavated located at the centre under a flint cairn. Unfortunately, both burials were undated and the bones from them were destroyed in the Second World War during an air raid, although the central burial is thought to date to the early Bronze Age (Parker Pearson 2012, 85).

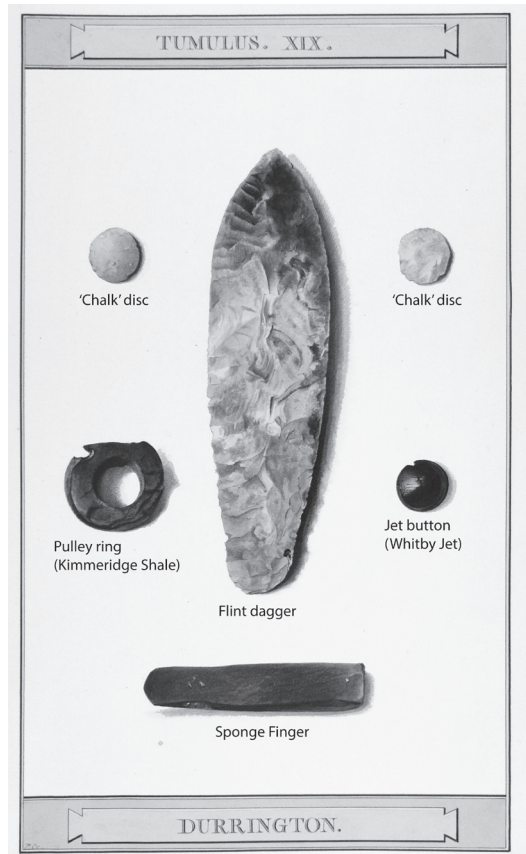
## Defining the Beaker period

The Beaker ‘package’ in Britain, evidenced mainly from the funerary record, varies over time and space. The dates for Beaker pottery in Wiltshire range from c. 2450BC through to a late phase at c. 1700BC (Needham 2005). The initial set of Beaker-associated material culture arrives in Britain from the continent, as a new style of funerary practice (inhumation) and artefact types (Beaker pottery and associated artefacts of the Beaker set) become visible in the archaeological record (Needham 2012). Needham (2005) provides a threefold division of the

chronology of the Beaker period, with a primary package associated with an exclusive Beaker culture 2450–2250BC, followed by emergent diversifying packages associated with the instituted culture Beaker phase 2250–1950BC, and then by a Beakers as past reference phase, with poorly furnished burials 1950–1700BC. The fission horizon is the interface at c. 2250BC between the earlier exclusive phase of burials and the later, more diverse and abundant burials of the Beaker as instituted culture phase.

Using this chronological framework, the initial exclusive phase has a small number of burials associated with a limited artefact range, within a relatively standardised burial package. Although some of these early burials have large numbers of artefacts, the variety of artefacts is still relatively limited (rare early copper knives, Beaker pots, barbed and tanged arrowheads, stone wrist guards and occasional gold hair-ties (ear rings) (Needham 2005; Sheridan 2012). Following the fission horizon there is a diversification of Beaker pottery types in the Instituted phase (2250–2000BC), with an increasing array of funerary grave goods, including jet buttons, boars' tusks, battle axes, whetstones, bronze knives/daggers, barbed and tanged arrowheads, and flint daggers as some of the more common types (Case 2004).

These grave goods occur in different combinations, with variation in inhumation practice also evident, including single inhumations, e.g. Amesbury Archer (Fitzpatrick 2013), and also graves with two or more individuals, e.g. the Boscombe Bowmen (Fitzpatrick 2017). The burials themselves are sometimes placed in flat graves (e.g. Amesbury Archer, Fitzpatrick 2013), sometimes in flat graves against standing stones (e.g. the West Kennet Avenue; Smith 1965), and sometimes under or within barrows e.g. Barrow Hills (Oxfordshire) (Barclay and Halpin 1999). There is also significant variation in the numbers of artefacts placed in graves, with some well-furnished graves such as the Amesbury Archer (Fitzpatrick 2013) at one end of the range, through to single inhumations with only a Beaker pot at the other end, e.g. the Sanctuary burial, Avebury (Cunnington 1931). It is unclear what social rules governed the inclusion of these different grave goods within different burials, although commonly argued stances are social status (e.g. Case 1995; Brodie 1997). These grave goods often include items exotic to a region, utilising raw materials distant to the location of burial. This has been interpreted as indicating extensive exchange routes as a feature of the Beaker culture and part



*Fig. 5 The original engraving of the finds from the Sarsen Burial published in Ancient Wiltshire (1812), drawn by Phillip Crocker, with annotation. These finds are now on display in Devizes Museum*

of the identity of being Beaker (Needham 2007). In contrast the Beaker pot itself is often made from local clays (Gibson 2002) and, consequently, Beaker grave assemblages sometimes contain a collection of materials from a range of resources at local to national and international scales. The Sarsen Burial at Durrington Walls occurs within this Beaker time frame.

## The Durrington Walls Sarsen Burial grave assemblage

The grave goods from the Sarsen Burial are an important artefact grouping, comprising a flint dagger, a stone sponge finger, a jet V perforated button, a shale pulley ring, and two chalk discs

(Figure 5). Due to Cunnington's practice of not recovering human bones from his excavations, only the artefacts from this burial are archived in Devizes museum. There is no bone material suitable for radiocarbon dating from the burial, nor material to estimate the age or gender of the individual interred. The orientation of the body is recorded as the head facing north, but the placement of artefacts relative to the body are unknown. The flint dagger in the Sarsen Burial is a Class 3 flint dagger, the most numerous type recorded in Britain. The date of flint daggers found in Beaker period funerary contexts is tightly grouped to 2250–2000BC when associated with radiocarbon dates. These flint daggers are mainly found in inhumations without Beaker pottery in adult male graves: only 17 of 43 burials listed by Friemann (2014) contained a Beaker pot as well. Although flint daggers are frequently described as part of the 'Beaker package', they have never been found alongside metal objects in funerary contexts. All 17 flint daggers recorded in funerary contexts were associated with Long Necked Beaker pots (Friemann 2014, 49), a style not found in the archaeological record until the period 2200–1950BC (Needham 2012).

The sponge finger with the Sarsen Burial is made of Devonian Killas from the southwest peninsula of England, a particularly hard type of stone. It is one of ten found in Britain in stratified associations, all from Beaker period burials. Five were associated with Long Necked Beakers, with two graves containing a pair of sponge fingers. On four occasions sponge fingers are associated with sets of jet shale pulley rings and V-perforated buttons (Woodward *et al.* 2015, 69–72). The association of sponge fingers with Long Necked Beakers indicates the placing of sponge fingers in graves only took place after the fission horizon, 2250–1950BC (Needham 2005). This sponge finger had been used extensively as some form of tool, possibly leather-working; one end of the tool may have been broken in use and reshaped to a rougher bevel.

The pulley ring from the Sarsen Burial is a Class IV belt and pulley ring; it is made from Kimmeridge shale. Nineteen belt and pulley rings were analysed by Woodward *et al.* (2015, 59–68). Of these 11 were found in grave assemblages also containing Beaker pottery, whilst 8 came from grave assemblages without Beaker pottery. Belt and pulley rings are found alongside flint daggers in grave assemblages four times, whilst they are associated with sponge fingers five times. The V-perforated button is also made from a regionally exotic material, Whitby jet.

It is of Class 4, relatively small and oval in shape. V-perforated buttons have been suggested to have been cloak fasteners or part of a belt fastener, when associated with a pulley ring (Woodward *et al.* 2015, 154–5). The recovery of the two chalk discs, the size of farthings, is intriguing. It is likely that the source of these materials is local although this is conjectural. If it is, then the grave assemblage includes materials from local to national scales. The distances over which some these materials have been brought indicates the exchange networks available to the individual of the Sarsen Burial or those who buried the body, and were conspicuous symbols of connections to places and peoples from beyond the local region.

Both the pulley ring and the V-perforated button appear to be heavily worn. On the V-perforated button all four drill holes of the broken-out V perforations show thread wear, and the area where the V perforations were broken was also smoothed by further use. A single perforation was then made, which also broke, but use of the ring continued, with the broken edge of this single perforation also shows smoothing and wear (Woodward *et al.* 2015). These grave goods demonstrate considerable use before being placed within the grave assemblage, and are likely to have had long biographies. It is possible that these grave goods had accrued social value when they were included in the grave assemblage, not simply because of the exotic nature, but also due to their longevity of use (possibly heirlooms), and their potential to be associated with specific individuals and/or social groups, and with tales or legends associated with them (Woodward 2002).

The grave goods of the dagger, the sponge finger, and the ring and the V perforated button, all belong to artefact types dating to the end of the third millennium BC, between 2250 and 1950 BC. This is the period after the fission horizon that Needham (2005) describes as 'Beaker instituted culture'.

## The Burial in the monumental landscape

To place the Sarsen Burial within the context of the Beaker period and the Durrington Walls monument, these strands need to be drawn together. As discussed, in the immediate vicinity of Durrington Walls are several Beaker period inhumations, with the Sarsen Burial close to the northwest entrance of Durrington Walls. The dating of the Sarsen Burial



to 2250–1950BC places it after the main construction phase of Durrington Walls henge ditch and bank 2500–2400BC, after the period of activity associated with the Southern Circle at Durrington Walls (radiocarbon date from an antler pick within one of the postholes of the Southern Circle, (2580–2400 cal BC 1 sigma)), and after activity within the henge (radiocarbon date from a pig bone within a pit in the east entrance (2630–2470 cal BC 2 sigma) (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2006)). The siting of burials from the Beaker period and succeeding Bronze Ages to reference earlier monuments is well attested across the major of henges of Wiltshire (Cleal and Pollard 2012; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2006; Bowden *et al.* 2017), with the grave assemblage of the Sarsen Burial distinct within the Durrington Walls landscape. For such a curious and well-furnished grave, the absence of a Beaker pot is striking. This is interpreted as highly significant.

It is possible that the presence of Beaker pot within a grave assemblage is a cultural reference, one that indicates some form of connection to the ‘Beaker way of life’ (Carey and Higham forthcoming). Several lines of thought show this might be the case. Beaker pottery, with its widespread distribution across both Britain and Europe, entered the British Isles from the continent. When this pottery style arrived in Britain it was associated with inhumation, with Beaker pots being placed in the graves. This marks a change to indigenous traditions in the Wiltshire landscape. As Thomas (1991, 157), writes with reference to the first appearance of Beaker material culture: ‘that on their first appearance within any community these things would have been recognised as unfamiliar, and extrinsic to any local social network. What is important is not that Beaker pottery and other artefacts associated with it were necessarily ‘special’, but they were different from other, indigenous forms of material culture.’ Secondly, although the forms and decoration styles of the pots change over time, they are recognisable as Beakers, and can be interpreted as referencing a wider ideal or idea. Shennan (1982) suggests that the Beaker assemblage was a set of symbols, but the ideas to which they referred were not fixed. It would appear that over time the meaning or custom of being buried with Beaker pottery changed, as new and different items came to be placed in grave assemblages such as jet buttons, copper-alloy and flint daggers, and sponge fingers, in contrast to earlier Beaker grave assemblages. Thirdly, within Wiltshire in particular, the placing of Beaker pots into graves has a long currency of use, up to 700 years. This indicates that

the pot itself is part of some idea with a longevity of use or belief. During the latest phase of Beaker use in Wiltshire (1950–1700BC), the pots are of a poorer quality and grave assemblages are sparse (Needham 2005). These late burials may be references back to an earlier (Beaker) ideal by groups or individuals with reduced social status, perhaps fewer in number, and with a lower ability to procure rare or prestige items.

The dead are buried by the living. Those who bury the dead do so not with actual but instead with idealised expressions of the deceased in life. Furthermore, the deceased may be manipulated to legitimise customs of the living, or even to aggrandise and advertise the cultures and practices of the living (Parker Pearson 1999). Mourners placing goods with the deceased construct an identity for the dead and their relationship to the dead. Therefore, the inclusion of a Beaker pot was a highly significant act, one that expressed something of the deceased in life, which is interpreted here as a referral to a Beaker ‘way of life’. If the inclusion of a Beaker pot was a significant cultural reference, the omission of one from the Sarsen Burial is also interpretable as significant and deliberate. Here is an individual with access to burial in the landscape of Durrington Walls; burial within such an important landscape marks them out as special. The artefacts placed in the grave make a statement of some form of social status. It is unlikely that such an individual could not acquire a Beaker pot made of local clay, albeit that the procurement of such a vessel may well have been subscribed with complex social interaction.

However, burial with the landscape of Durrington Walls was also accessible to for internment of individuals associated with Beaker pottery. If the Sarsen Burial is seen as someone whose grave *deliberately* lacked a Beaker vessel, this could indicate a different identity or belief system to those who were buried with Beakers. In this way, we can see the area of Durrington Walls as accessible to different traditions of burial and by extension to different ways of life. Does then, the Sarsen Burial represent another form of belief system or way of life, coexisting with and alongside the Beaker phenomenon?

Was the Sarsen Burial capped by a stone or placed at a base of a pre-existing standing stone? The sarsen stone could have been standing, with the burial placed in a pit at its base, and subsequently pushed over (see the examples on the West Kennet Avenue (Smith 1965)). If the sarsen had been dragged to this location specifically to cap this burial, it would almost certainly have been procured from another

part of Stonehenge and Durrington monumental landscape. In either case, the presence of the sarsen stone is highly significant. It may be a previously unrecognised standing stone in the Durrington Walls monumental complex, as its position was either under or within the bank of the henge, or very close to the bank edge. Either possibility is intriguing, especially given the current interpretations of the use of wood at Durrington Walls compared to the use of stone at Stonehenge (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2006), although stone holes were recently excavated on the avenue on the east side of Durrington Walls (Parker Pearson 2012).

## Conclusion

The reconsideration of the Durrington Walls Sarsen Burial is a testament to the research carried out by Sir Richard Colt Hoare and William Cunnington within the Wiltshire landscape. A highly significant burial, interred just outside of the Durrington Walls henge, buried during the height of the Beaker period but without a Beaker pot, creates simple but far reaching questions about identify and belief, during this socially dynamic period of prehistory. The early incursion of the Beaker set into Wiltshire marks out a changing prehistoric world from 2450BC onwards, with the intrusion of new ideas and practices. Is it possible that the Durrington Walls Sarsen Burial represents an individual who lived within, and witnessed, this changing world, and in death chose not to be represented with the Beaker pottery, nor metals, but was buried under a sarsen stone, close to the henge of Durrington Walls.

## Acknowledgements

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