

Llandegai excavations 1966–67: further thoughts on interpretations

By FRANCES LYNCH

The dating of Llandegai Henge B (published in Archaeologia Cambrensis 150) is reviewed in the light of the evidence from the adjacent excavations at Parc Bryn Cegin (published in Archaeologia Cambrensis 157). This suggests that pits clustered in and around the henge containing Middle and Late Neolithic Grooved Ware and Peterborough Ware probably represent earlier activity. Two features, FB138 and FB2, which appear to be significantly sited in relation to the monument probably provide the best indication of the date of construction. The first has provided a radiocarbon date of 2280–2250 cal. BC, and the second a date with the wide range of 2600–1700 cal. BC. Comparison with more recently excavated assemblages suggests that the profiles of some of the Early Neolithic carinated vessels from Llandegai should be amended and that some of the pottery previously considered to be undiagnostic should now be seen as Grooved Ware.

As Alex Gibson says in the introduction to the preceding article in this volume, the Llandegai excavations took place at a time when large-scale excavation with machines was in its infancy and many of the subtleties of radiocarbon dating had not emerged, let alone been understood. Moreover, the type of features being explored — circular banks and ditches — (be they henges or later prehistoric enclosures) are singularly lacking in informative artefacts, for the former, everywhere; for the latter, in north Wales in particular. Therefore a lot of interpretation was dependent on circumstantial evidence and the ‘weight of probability’ built on the patterns of behaviour expected.

Reworking the evidence does not, in my opinion, provide the conclusions about the initial date for either of the big circles — Henge A or Henge B — with a *strong* argument. For myself, I will continue to believe that Henge A, with its wide and flat-bottomed ditch, was a late Neolithic construction, largely because of locational and behavioural choices made at both enclosures by their builders.

This is not to say that there are not many doubts and uncertainties in the record, and in this note I want to draw attention to some problems concerning Henge B (where I directed excavations for much of the period of work). These doubts have been raised by looking at the patterns of behaviour demonstrated by people in the later Neolithic occupying the valley slopes, now known at Parc Bryn Cegin, just some 500m to the south of the monuments (Kenney 2008).

One of the closest comparisons between the two excavations lay in the discovery of substantial Neolithic rectangular wooden buildings at both sites. The ground plans were very similar as were the finds from the postholes, except that at Parc Bryn Cegin the postholes contained several flakes of Graig Lwyd stone and pieces of broken polished axes, demonstrating that the conclusions, drawn from their absence at the Llandegai I house, regarding the late date of the local use of Graig Lwyd stone, is wrong (Lynch and Musson 2001, 35).

I would like to make another small correction to the Early Neolithic information in both reports. It concerns the assumed profiles of the Irish Sea Ware pots with rather straight necks (Lynch and Musson 2001, fig. 12, B98 and Kenney 2008, fig. 8, SF77/84). Both these are shown with carinated shoulders, but

subsequent work, yet to be published, on pots from Clynog Fawr, Gwynedd (Roberts 2007; 2009) and Borrás, Wrexham (Grant 2015), has shown that the true profiles might have been very different, with a broad out-turned shoulder, like an amphora, above a globular body. This profile, vulnerable to breakage, may be more common than we thought.

But the main purpose of this note is to reconsider the relationship of the pits close to the ditch of Henge B with the monument. The central cremation (FB138) is dated from bone to 2280–2250 cal. BC (GrA-22966) and the cremation pit at the south-west entrance (FB2) is dated from oak charcoal to 2600–1700 cal. BC (NPL-222) an unhelpfully wide dating, but one which does include the period highlighted by GrA-22966. I would judge that these two features are significantly sited in relation to the design of the monument and should be considered relevant to its construction.

The other pits are randomly sited in relation to the monument (the ditch and its assumed external bank) and their content and dating caused difficulties when the report came to be written in 2000–03) (Lynch and Musson 2001, 56). These pits contain finds of Graig Lwyd stone, axe fragments and flint (FB151), Middle and Late Neolithic pottery (FB39 and FB147), Beakers (FB27 and FB29, FB30), and charred wood (FB130 and FB131); and in this discussion we can resurrect FB32 which lay under the area of the putative external bank (Lynch and Musson 2001, 30). Some of them have also got radiocarbon dates which, in the case of FB151 and FB147 are significantly earlier than the date for the central cremation.

Looking at the evidence from Parc Bryn Cegin (Kenney 2008, 33–55) it is clear that in the Middle and Late Neolithic people were digging clusters of pits and burying substantial, but broken pieces of pottery, together with charcoal and burnt stone and occasionally pieces of flint or stone flakes. At Parc Bryn Cegin the clustering of pits is quite marked and pits with Mortlake pottery, with Fengate Ware and with Grooved Ware are clearly separated within the large area stripped and examined. Kenney (2008, 55) has already made the point that the pits around Henge B should be seen in the light of this pre-existing tradition of a perhaps ritual use of domestic material.

The large scale of the excavations at Llandegai in 1966–67 is often noted, but in fact the detailed investigation was largely confined to the areas shown by air photographs to contain monuments. Only token narrow trenches were opened to examine the areas between them. It is a sad fact that in early 1966 the RAF asked to be allowed to try out new geophysical equipment. They were invited to run it over the area of the cursus banks, a simple test which came up with some confusing results and they went away disheartened. Later excavation revealed that they had picked up the Early Christian cemetery which had been too slight to produce cropmarks (based on information in Department of the Environment/Cadw files). Had a modern ‘strip and map’ method of excavation been possible then, the difficulties of monument/feature association might have been diminished, though the heavy agricultural use of the land over recent centuries would still have made stratigraphic relationships difficult to sort out.

With the benefit of insights from Parc Bryn Cegin it is possible to demonstrate from artefactual and radiocarbon evidence that pits FB 151 (2800–2600 cal. BC; GrA-20014,); FB 147 (Grooved Ware and 2800–2500 cal. BC; GrA-20013) and also FB39 with a probable Mortlake style pot and FB32, under the bank and containing ‘a few crushed sherds (B44) of dark, extremely friable clinker-like pottery’, all belong to a pre-henge phase of pit digging, as Dr Gibson found at Dyffryn Lane, Powys (Gibson 2010). B44 might now also be compared to Grooved Ware material, again awaiting publication, from several features at Llanfaethlu, Anglesey (Rees and Jones 2015; 2017). The very small amount of Mortlake and Fengate Ware from Henge A might also be explained in this way, though the context is less clear.

The two dated pits (FB130 and 131) from the group just south of the centre of Henge B do not contain pottery and are rather later than the pottery pits listed above and are close to the date of the central cremation (Lynch and Musson 2001, fig. 28, 64). They are shallow pits with charred wooden planks; in the case of FB131 the wood appears to be a tray containing a group of rounded pebbles. I have no

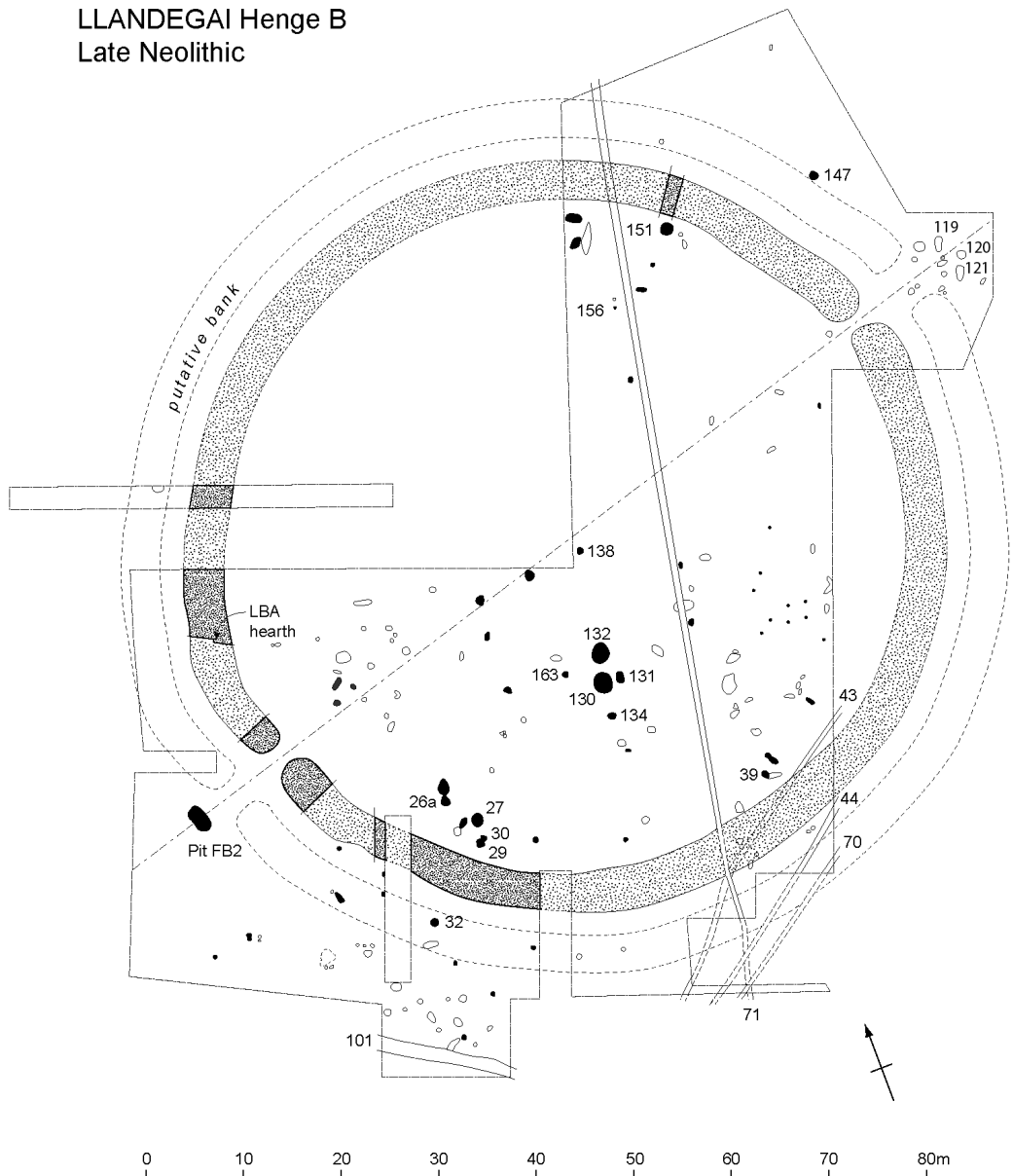


Fig 1 Llandegai Henge B (after Lynch and Musson 2001).

explanation for it, but if you can invoke a henge/religious context for it, no explanation is expected!: ‘Who is there among you, who, if his son ask for bread, will give him a stone?’ (Matthew 7: 9).

The three Beakers buried close to the inner edge of the ditch in the southern sector of Henge B are also problematic (Lynch and Musson 2001, fig. 30, 65–7). One, FB27 containing Beaker B26 beneath a complex framework of charred wood, is dated to 2140–1870 cal. BC (GrN-26820) and the other Beakers

are typologically late, so the group is very likely to have been buried within the henge and therefore may have a different meaning and context from the other pottery pits. It is notable that the Parc Bryn Cegin pits contain in their various clusters all the current Late Neolithic pottery styles, but there is no Beaker pottery there.

No excavation can ever provide an answer to every question, but it is always worth going back to awkward questions when more information becomes available and new perspectives can be applied.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gibson, A. M., 2010. 'Excavation and survey at the Dyffryn Lane henge complex, Powys, and a reconsideration of the dating of henges', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 76, 213–48.
- 2018. 'Llandegai A – sanctuary or settlement?', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 167, 95–108. [this volume]
- Grant, I., 2015. 'Wrexham, Borrass Quarry', *Archaeology in Wales* 55, 50.
- Kenney, J., 2008. 'Recent excavations at Parc Bryn Cegin, Llandygai near Bangor', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 157, 9–142
- Lynch, F. M. and Musson, C. R., 2001. 'A prehistoric and early medieval complex at Llandegai, near Bangor, north Wales', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 150 (2004), 17–142
- Rees, C. and Jones, M., 2015. 'Neolithic houses from Llanfaethlu, Anglesey', *Past* 81, 1–2.
- 2017. 'Wales' earliest village? Exploring a Neolithic neighbourhood at Llanfaethlu', *Current Archaeology* 332, 18–26.
- Roberts, J., 2007. 'Clynnog Fawr, A499 Road Improvement Scheme', *Archaeology in Wales* 47, 128–9.
- 2009. 'A499 Road Improvement Scheme: Post-excavation Assessment, Project Design for phase 3 of MAP2: Assessment of potential for analysis', unpublished report, Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Report 1282.