



Left. Topsoil is machined off in an area next to the River Wharfe just outside Boston Spa, Yorkshire, where fieldwalking and geophysics have located an enigmatic site. A bizarre arrangement of pits and gullies was immediately revealed.

A prehistoric portal to the underworld?



Uncovering the history of your own town or village often produces surprises. Not often, though, does it bring you into direct contact with 5,000-year-old rituals. A line of mysterious pits, patterns of stones resembling animals, two rocks carved with symbolic lines: did they mark the entrance to a Neolithic underworld? Malcolm Barnes, Chair of the Boston Spa and District Community Archaeology Group, describes some unusual discoveries just outside his village and speculates on their meaning.

Above A Neolithic core: one of many worked flints found within the bend in the River Wharfe where the Boston Spa and District Community Archaeology Group have been working.

The Yorkshire village of Boston Spa developed after the 1743 discovery of a salt spring in the bank of the River Wharfe. Our group was set up in 1999 to find out what happened in the area before that. We soon found scatters of prehistoric flint tools and concentrations of flint-knapping waste within a large loop of the river on the edge of the village. Could we discover who the early inhabitants were?

Further fieldwalking showed, as might be expected, that the proportion of flint artefacts increased and that of knapping waste decreased as we moved away from the main processing areas. All stages of knapping were represented. There were tools of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age date. The range of implements implied hunting, camping and settlement. Some poor-quality flint had come from the Yorkshire Wolds, but most was good-quality material from the east coast. What stood out especially was the quantity and range of Neolithic tools, and the large amounts of associated waste and numerous nodules of raw material, suggesting a community may have developed in this period, one for which the processing of flint was important, either for their own use or for trading with others.

We were unable, however, to locate any occupation layers or structures, and test-pits revealed only the level at which flint and later finds had settled. We needed to delve further to find our early community. An air-photo survey, funded by a Local Heritage Grant, revealed features that looked like field and enclosure boundaries. This helped us target areas for geophysical survey. It was this that revealed a different sort of feature that coincided with two clusters of Neolithic flint tools on the fieldwalking plots. What was it? A ploughed-out ditch? A line of pits associated with a settlement? It had not shown up on the air photos,

Right The Boston Spa project is located in a loop of the River Wharfe immediately north of Boston Spa itself. The ground slopes gently down towards the river.



whereas a Romano-British ditch, which stopped just short of it, had. It was time for some serious digging.

The new feature lay on a low ridge running roughly east-west across part of the neck of land inside the river loop. Machine-excavation of the overlying soil revealed five 'segregated' bath-shaped pits (numbers 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 on the plan). The largest (5) was 2.8m by 1.1m across and 0.5m deep, the other four not much smaller. We cleaned the top of each pit by hand so as not to disturb any capping. The fills were clean, fairly homogeneous, and lacking in settlement waste or organic remains, save some tiny pieces of charcoal and a few burnt stones.

Most of the pits had been re-dug or enlarged. Apparently, each time, they had been refilled soon after construction. It may be that their digging was more important than their contents - except, however, for one thing. As the pits were cleaned, a strange stone layer appeared near the top of each fill. These stones did not appear to have been randomly placed. Each arrangement was different and seemed to be some sort of stylised representation of an animal. The clearest resembled a fish, but there may also have been a wild boar, a cow or a pig, and two similar headless shapes, one behind the other, perhaps hunting dogs with lean, fit chests and strong hind quarters. There were too many coincidences for this to be dismissed as a fancy. Furthermore, earlier stone arrangements, presumably disturbed when the pits were re-dug, appeared to have been tipped back in with the new fill, for we found jumbles of stones lying at an angle deeper down in each



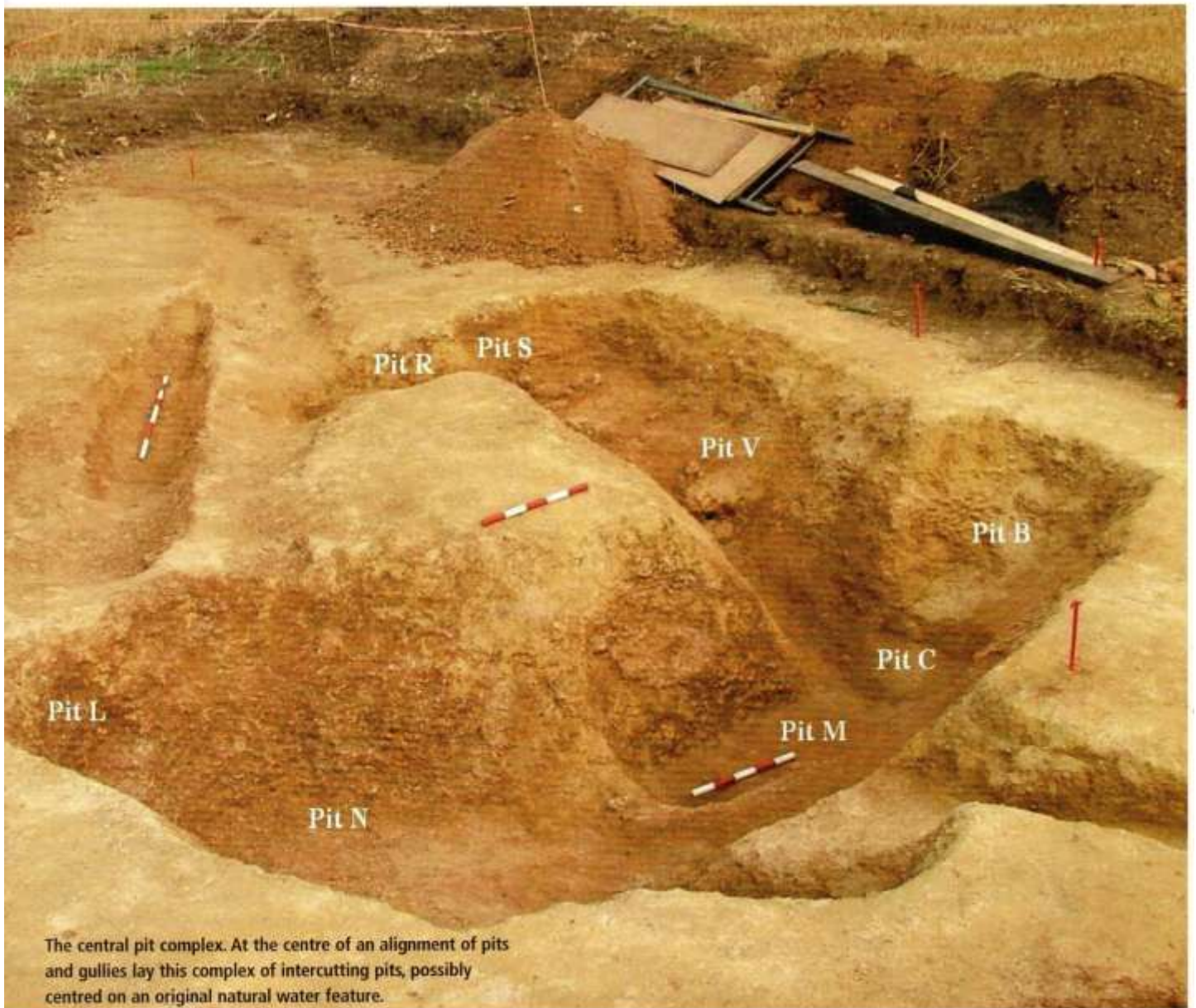
Above Members of the Boston Spa and District Community Archaeology Group begin excavating Neolithic features after machine-stripping of the topsoil.

pit. What did the stone arrangements mean?

Three other pits (1, 2 and 3) were shallower, but were also topped by stones and had similar fills. These 'satellite' pits appeared to be linked to a central pit complex by a shallow ribbon ditch. The latter may have been partly natural, as it formed a chute diving into the central complex, and was perhaps originally a water-eroded feature chosen as the focus of the monument.

The central pit complex contained eight pits of various shapes and sizes (B, C, L, M, N, R, S and V), cut at different times, with some overlapping. Unlike the 'segregated' and 'satellite' pits, none had stone arrangements on top. Within some, however, there were some extraordinary finds.

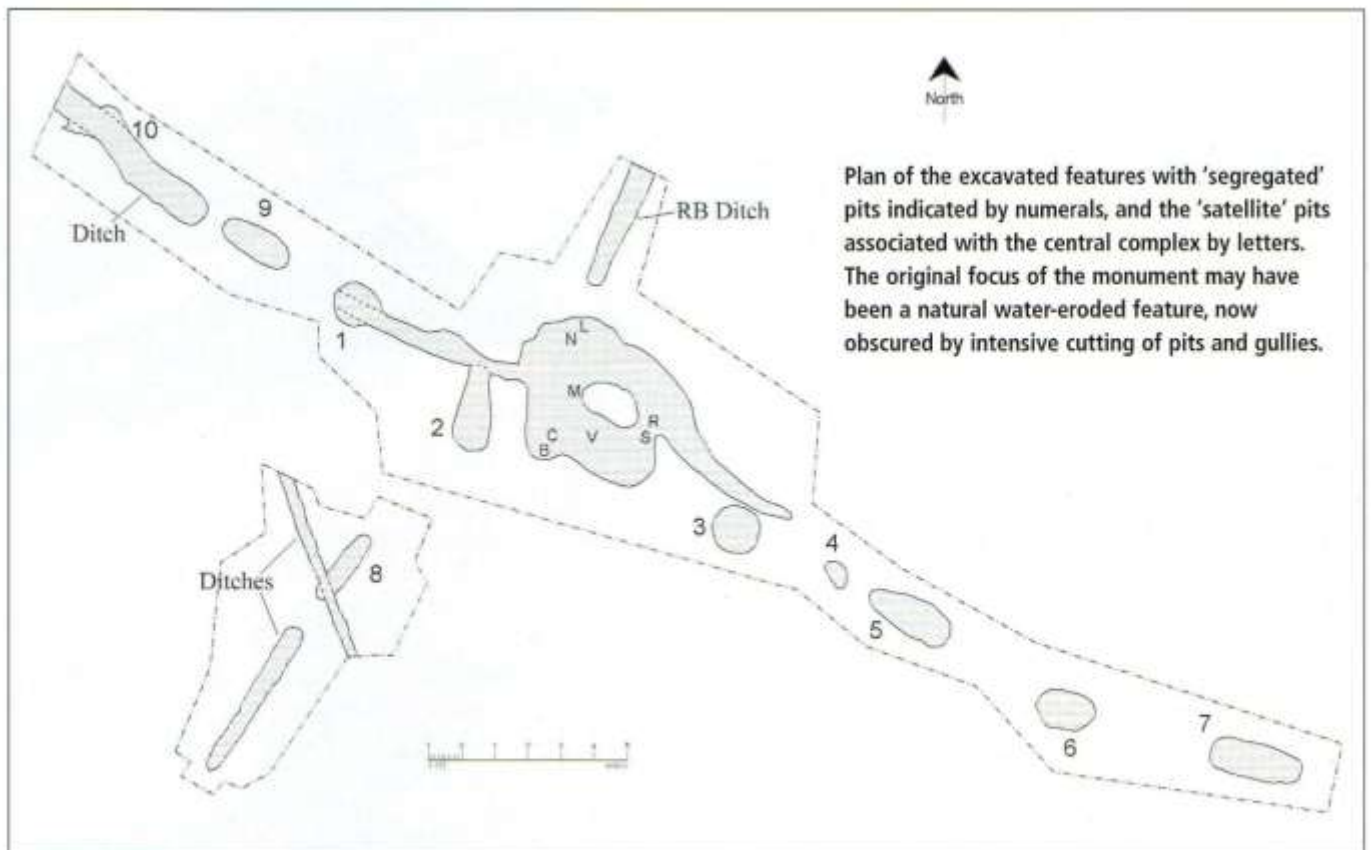
A scatter of stones containing half an unworn Roman greyware base, or 'pot-disc', was found in Pit N opposite the end of the Romano-British ditch. We wondered if it had been deliberately deposited - perhaps as a



The central pit complex. At the centre of an alignment of pits and gullies lay this complex of intercutting pits, possibly centred on an original natural water feature.



Above left Excavation of the 'segregated' and 'satellite' pits revealed that each had been capped with a distinctive arrangement of stones. These did not appear to be random scatters. **Above right** The stones capping Pit 9 may be thought to resemble a fish.



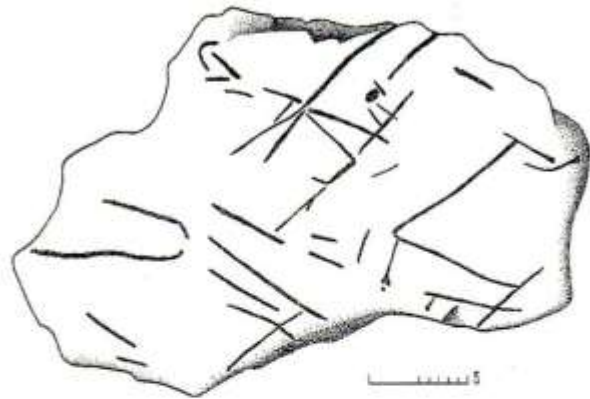
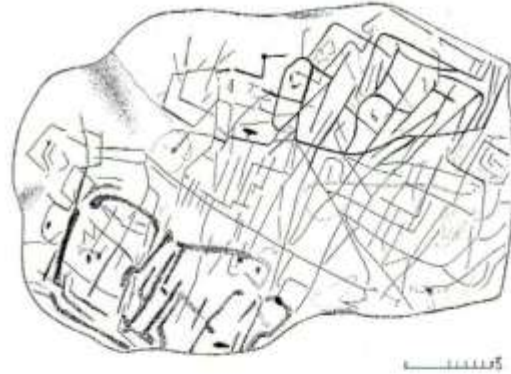
Left The stones capping Pit 7. There seem to be two similar designs side by side. Surely this is too much to be coincidence. Might they not be hunting dogs?



Left below The stone arrangement capping Pit 6. Is this a cow? Or perhaps a pig? Or is the whole idea a figment of the excavators' overly creative imagination?

Below The stones capping Pit 5. The local numismatist was laughed at when he said the shape reminded him of the very stylised designs of wild boars that appear on Iron Age coins.





placatory offering, with the top stones from an aligned pit, when the ditch terminus disturbed it. Pit V contained a rubbing stone, suitable for a saddle quern, which had been burnt and used as a hammer stone. In Pit R there were two more rubbing stones. Finally, two carved limestone blocks were discovered in their own separate pits (B and S), both placed face down near the top of the fill.

The carvings are of an unusual linear type. One stone has a more complex design than the other, while both show a sense of spacing and arrangement, with different zones of decoration. The range of motifs includes grids, boxes, offsets, diamonds, and other linear patterns. Similar designs have been found on stones in north-east Yorkshire; and they have clear parallels with the art inside many Neolithic passage graves elsewhere in the British Isles and on the Continent.

What sense can we make of this extraordinary series of pits and their contents? We may not have found our Neolithic settlement, but we had perhaps found its ceremonial focus. I think the significance of the 'segregated' pits must have lain in the act of construction and alignment, with surface

stone patterns, open to view. The pits in the central feature, however, have buried deposits, with carvings recalling hidden passage-grave art. Could the ditch that links together the different parts of this feature, with the inclined chute into its centre, have been a symbolic passageway from the open into the secret, from the natural into the supernatural? The structured pit deposits might have been an act of closure on leaving the site, especially if the carvings on the stones had in some way represented the relationship of the people who lived there to their land. In that case, there would have been no point taking them elsewhere. The stones were rooted there, in a field on the edge of what would, thousands of years later, become Boston Spa.

Source

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Further information

www.bsparch.org.uk (including news of the latest excavation of a parallel pit alignment on the same site)

Above The carved limestone blocks found near the surface of the fills in Pits B and S within the central complex. The lines are hard to see on the actual blocks, even in slanting light, but Paul Bowers line drawings show the carvings clearly. Were these once standing stones, or were they always recumbent? Were they carved by specialist craftworkers or shamans, or was the whole community symbolised by everyone carving a mark? What did the marks represent? So many questions the answers to which are probably lost forever: the carvings belong to a Neolithic religious thought-world the richness and complexity of which we perhaps barely begin to comprehend.